Buddha’s Brain:

*Lighting up the Neural Circuits of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom*

Esalen

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Topics

- Perspectives
- Self-directed neuroplasticity
- Being on your own side
- The power of mindfulness
- Being and doing
- The evolving brain
- Coming home to happiness
- The craving brain
- Cultivation
- Equanimity
- Flowers pulling weeds
- Your loving nature
- Empathy, compassion, and kindness
- Strength with heart
Perspectives
Common - and Fertile - Ground

Psychology

Neurology

Contemplative Practice
Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay, by a collection of texts, by logic, by inferential reasoning, by reasoned cognition, by the acceptance of a view after pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker, or because you think, “this . . . is our teacher.”

But when you know for yourselves, “these things are wholesome, these things are blameless; these things are praised by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practiced, lead to welfare and happiness,” then you should engage in them.

The Buddha
When the facts change,  
I change my mind, sir.

What do you do?

John Maynard Keynes
We ask, “What is a thought?”

We don’t know,

yet we are thinking continually.

Venerable Tenzin Palmo
Self-Directed Neuroplasticity
Basics of Meditation

- Relax; posture that is comfortable and alert
- Simple good will toward yourself
- Awareness of your body
- Focus on something to steady your attention
- Accepting whatever passes through awareness
- Gently settling into peaceful well-being
7 Neural Factors of Mindfulness

- **Setting an intention** - “top-down” frontal, “bottom-up” limbic
- **Relaxing the body** - parasympathetic nervous system
- **Feeling cared about** - social engagement system
- **Feeling safer** - inhibits amygdala/hippocampus alarms
- **Encouraging positive emotion** - dopamine, norepinephrine
- **Panoramic view** - lateral networks
- **Absorbing the benefits** - positive implicit memories
A Neuron

- Dendrite
- Soma (cell body)
- Nucleus
- Axon terminal button
- Myelin sheath

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Mental States Become Neural Traits

- The nervous system represents, stores, operates upon, and communicates *information*. This is the “mind,” which is mainly outside awareness.

- How neural activity becomes conscious experience remains a mystery - but there is no doubt that mental and neural activity co-arise.

- As the mind changes, the brain changes - both temporarily and in lasting ways.
Fact #1

As your brain changes, your mind changes.
Ways That Brain Can Change Mind

- For better:
  - A little caffeine: more alertness
  - Thicker insula: more self-awareness, empathy
  - More left prefrontal activation: more happiness

- For worse:
  - Intoxication; imbalances in neurotransmitters
  - Concussion, stroke, tumor, Alzheimer’s
  - Cortisol-based shrinkage of hippocampus: less capacity for contextual memory
Fact #2

As your mind changes, your brain changes.

Immaterial mental activity co-occurs with, correlates with material neural activity.

This produces temporary changes in your brain and lasting ones. Temporary changes include:

- Alterations in brainwaves (= changes in the firing patterns of synchronized neurons)
- Changing consumption of oxygen and glucose
- Ebbs and flows of neurochemicals
The Rewards of Love
Tibetan Monk, Boundless Compassion
Christian Nuns, Recalling a Profound Spiritual Experience

Beauregard, et al., Neuroscience Letters, 9/25/06
Pain network: Dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC), insula (Ins), somatosensory cortex (SSC), thalamus (Thal), and periaqueductal gray (PAG). Reward network: Ventral tegmental area (VTA), ventral striatum (VS), ventromedial prefrontal cortex (VMPFC), and amygdala (Amyg). K. Sutliff, in Lieberman & Eisenberger, 2009, Science, 323:890-891
What flows through the mind sculpts your brain. Immaterial experience leaves material traces behind.

- Increased blood/nutrient flow to active regions
- Altered epigenetics (gene expression)
- “Neurons that fire together wire together.”
  - Increasing excitability of active neurons
  - Strengthening existing synapses
  - Building new synapses; thickening cortex
  - Neuronal “pruning” - “use it or lose it”
Meditation - Neural Benefits

- Increased gray matter in the:
  - **Insula** - interoception; self-awareness; empathy for emotions
  - **Hippocampus** - visual-spatial memory; establishing context; inhibiting amygdala and cortisol
  - **Prefrontal cortex (PFC)** - executive functions; attention control

- Reduced cortical thinning with aging in insula and PFC

- Increased activation of left frontal regions, which lifts mood

- Increased gamma-range brainwaves - may be associated with integration, “coming to singleness,” “unitary awareness”

- Preserved telomere length
Honoring Experience

Your experience *matters*. Both for how it feels in the moment and for the lasting residues it leaves behind, woven into the fabric of your brain and being.
Fact #3

You can use your mind
to change your brain
to change your mind for the better.

This is self-directed neuroplasticity.

*How to do this, in skillful ways?*
Being on Your Own Side
If one going down into a river, 
swollen and swiftly flowing, 
is carried away by the current -- 
how can one help others across?

The Buddha
The good life, as I conceive it, is a happy life.  
I do not mean that if you are good you will be happy;  
I mean that if you are happy you will be good.

Bertrand Russell
Self-Compassion

- Compassion is the wish that a being not suffer, combined with sympathetic concern. Self-compassion simply applies that to oneself. It is not self-pity, complaining, or wallowing in pain.

- Studies show that self-compassion buffers stress and increases resilience and self-worth.

- But self-compassion is hard for many people, due to feelings of unworthiness, self-criticism, or “internalized oppression.” To encourage the neural substrates of self-compassion:
  - Get the sense of being cared about by someone else.
  - Bring to mind someone you naturally feel compassion for
  - Sink into the experience of compassion in your body
  - Then shift the compassion to yourself, perhaps with phrases like: “May I not suffer. May the pain of this moment pass.”
“Anthem”

Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That’s how the light gets in
That’s how the light gets in

Leonard Cohen
The Power of Mindfulness
The Power of Attention

- Attention is like a spotlight, illuminating its object.

- Because neuroplasticity is heightened for what’s in the field of focused awareness, attention is also like a vacuum cleaner, pulling its contents into the brain.

- Directing attention skillfully is therefore a fundamental way to shape the brain - and one’s life over time.

- One of the many benefits of mindfulness training is the development of skillful attention.
The education of attention would be the education par excellence.

William James
The Three Great Ways To Engage the Mind

The great bird of practice has two wings: *being with* and *working with* the mind.

- *Working with* reduces negative and increases positive.
- In sum: Let be, let go, let in.

*Being with* is fundamental, but not all of practice:

- As a *state*, it is not peace, happiness, love, or wisdom.
- As a *factor*, it needs virtue, wisdom, compassion, etc.
- *Being with* and *working with* are synergistic; they can co-arise without interfering with each other.

And often we need to *work with* the mind to build up inner resources for *being with* it.
Cultivation Undoes Craving

- All life has goals. The brain continually seeks to avoid harms, approach rewards, and attach to others - even that of a Buddha.

- It is wholesome to wish for the happiness, welfare, and awakening of all beings - including the one with your nametag.

- We rest the mind upon positive states so that the brain may gradually take their shape. This disentangles us from craving as we increasingly rest in a peace, happiness, and love that is independent of external conditions.

- With time, even the practice of cultivation falls away - like a raft that is no longer needed once we reach the farther shore.
Know the mind.

Shape the mind.

Free the mind.
Being and Doing
# Dual Modes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>“Doing”</th>
<th>“Being”</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mainly representational</td>
<td>Mainly sensory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Much verbal activity</td>
<td>Little verbal activity</td>
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<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
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<tr>
<td>Future- or past-focused</td>
<td>Now-focused</td>
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<td>Goal-directed</td>
<td>Nothing to do, nowhere to go</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sense of craving</td>
<td>Sense of peace</td>
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<td>Personal, self-oriented perspective</td>
<td>Impersonal, 3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; person perspective</td>
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<tr>
<td>Focal view</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lost in thought, mind wandering</td>
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<td>Reverberation and recursion</td>
<td>Immediate and transient</td>
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<td>Tightly connected experiences</td>
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Increased Medial PFC Activation Related to Self-Referencing Thought

Cortical Midline Areas for Self-Referencing Thought

Self-Focused (blue) and Open Awareness (red) Conditions (in the novice, pre MT group)

Self-Focused (blue) vs Open Awareness (red) Conditions (following 8 weeks of MT)
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Ways to Activate “Being” Mode

- Relax
- Focus on bare sensations and perceptions
- Sense the body as a whole
- Take a panoramic, “bird’s-eye” view
- Engage “don’t-know mind”; release judgments
- Don’t try to connect mental contents together
- Let experience flow, staying here now
- Relax the sense of “I, me, and mine”
Whole Body Awareness

- Sense the breath in one area (e.g., chest, upper lip)
- Sense the breath as a whole: one gestalt, percept
- Sense the body as a whole, a whole body breathing
- Sense experience as a whole: sensations, sounds, thoughts . . . all arising together as one unified thing
- It’s natural for this sense of the whole to be present for a second or two, then crumble; just open up to it again and again.
Panoramic Awareness

- Recall a bird’s-eye view (e.g., mountain, airplane)

- Be aware of sounds coming and going in an open space of awareness, without any edges: boundless

- Open to other contents of mind, coming and going like clouds moving across the sky.

- Pleasant or unpleasant, no matter: just more clouds

- No cloud ever harms or taints the sky.
“Bahiya, you should train yourself thus.”

In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. To the heard, only the heard. To the sensed, only the sensed. To the cognized, only the cognized.

When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in the heard, only the sensed in the sensed, only the cognized in the cognized, then, Bahiya, there’s no you in that.

When there’s no you in that, there’s no you there. When there’s no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two.

This, just this, is the end of all suffering.

The Buddha
Hagmann, et al., 2008, PLoS Biology, 6:1479-1493
Blissful is passionlessness in the world,
The overcoming of sensual desires;
But the abolition of the conceit I am --
That is truly the supreme bliss.

The Buddha, Udāna 2.11
To study the Way is to study the self.

To study the self is to forget the self.

To forget the self is
To be enlightened by all things.

Dogen
Not Taking Life Personally

- Taking things personally (TTP):
  - Strong sense of “me, mine, I”; “an I who craves and clings”
  - Comparing to others
  - Feeling deliberately targeted
  - Embarrassment, envy, shame

- Situation, relationship, aim in which you’ve TTP (why, costs)

- What it would be like to not TTP (mind, body, heart, actions)

- What would help you not TTP
  - Perspectives
  - Experiential states (emotions, attitudes, somatic)
  - Actions, behaviors, plans
  - How to take these in
The Evolving Brain
Evolution

- ~ 4+ billion years of earth
- 3.5 billion years of life
- 650 million years of multi-celled organisms
- 600 million years of nervous system
- ~ 200 million years of mammals
- ~ 60 million years of primates
- ~ 6 million years ago: last common ancestor with chimpanzees, our closest relative among the “great apes” (gorillas, orangutans, chimpanzees, bonobos, humans)
- 2.5 million years of tool-making (starting with brains 1/3 our size)
- ~ 150,000 years of *homo sapiens*
- ~ 50,000 years of modern humans
- ~ 5000 years of blue, green, hazel eyes
Evolutionary History

The Triune Brain - (P. MacLean 1990)
Three Stages of Brain Evolution

- **Reptilian:**
  - Brainstem, cerebellum, hypothalamus
  - Reactive and reflexive
  - Avoid hazards

- **Mammalian:**
  - Limbic system, cingulate, early cortex
  - Memory, emotion, social behavior
  - Approach rewards

- **Human:**
  - Massive cerebral cortex
  - Abstract thought, language, cooperative planning, empathy
  - Attach to “us”
Three Fundamental Motivational and Self-Regulatory Systems

- **Avoid Harms:**
  - Primary need, tends to trump all others
  - Functional in first animals, in brainstem

- **Approach Rewards:**
  - Functional in first animals, in brainstem
  - Elaborated via sub-cortex in mammals for emotional valence, sustained pursuit, etc.

- **Attach to Others:**
  - Functional in mammals and birds, in sub-cortex
  - Very elaborated via cortex in humans for pair bonding, language, empathy, cooperative planning, compassion, altruism, etc.
"With all due respects, I find your disparaging remarks about the 'reptilian brain' unnecessary"
Coming Home to Happiness
Reverse Engineering the Brain

What’s the nature of the brain when a person is:

- In peak states of productivity or “flow?”
- Experiencing inner peace?
- Self-actualizing?
- Enlightened (or close to it)?
The Homeostatic Home Base

*When not disturbed by threat, loss, or rejection:*

The **body** defaults to a sustainable equilibrium of refueling, repairing, and pleasant abiding.

The **mind** defaults to a sustainable equilibrium of:

- **Peace** (the Avoiding system)
- **Happiness** (the Approaching system)
- **Love** (the Attaching system)

This is the brain in its homeostatic **Responsive** mode.
The Responsive Mode

- Avoid
- Peace
- Approach

Wisdom
Contentment

Love
Attach

Happiness
Sam sees “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 forever beyond its reach.”

Tolkein, *The Lord of the Rings*
Key Benefits of Responsive Mode

- Fueling for Reactive mobilizations; recovery after
- Positive emotions, cognitions, and behaviors
- Positive cycles
- Promotes virtue and benevolence

*The good life, as I conceive it, is a happy life.*

*I do not mean that if you are good you will be happy;*

*I mean that if you are happy you will be good.*

Bertrand Russell
Coming Home . . .

Peace

Happiness

Love
The Craving Brain
**Fired up for Survival**

*When disturbed by threat, loss, or rejection:*

The **body** fires up into the stress response; resources are burned for immediate needs; long-term building is deferred; outputs exceed inputs; unsustainable.

The **mind** fires up into:

- **Hatred** (the Avoiding system)
- **Greed** (the Approaching system)
- **Heartache** (the Attaching system)

This is the brain in its allostatic **Reactive** mode.
The Reactive Mode

- Avoid
- Hatred
- Greed

- Approach
- Ignorance
- Suffering

- Attach
- Heartache
Reactive Dysfunctions in Each System

- **Avoid** - Anxiety disorders; PTSD; panic, terror; rage; violence

- **Approach** - Addiction; over-drinking, -eating, -gambling; compulsion; hoarding; driving for goals at great cost; spiritual materialism

- **Attach** - Borderline, narcissistic, antisocial PD; symbiosis; *folie a deux*; “looking for love in all the wrong places”
Evolution of the Negativity Bias

- **Harms** ("sticks") - Predators, natural hazards, social aggression, pain (physical and psychological)

- **Rewards** ("carrots") - Food, sex, shelter, social support, pleasure (physical and psychological)

Avoiding “sticks” usually affects passing on genes more than approaching “carrots.”

- **Urgency** - Usually, sticks must be avoided immediately while carrots allow a longer approach.

- **Impact** - Often, the presence of a stick ends life while the absence of a carrot does not; if you fail to get a carrot today, you’ll likely have another chance tomorrow, but if you fail to avoid a stick today - whap! - no more carrots forever.
Negativity Bias: Some Consequences

- Negative stimuli get more attention and processing.
- We generally learn faster from pain than pleasure.
- People work harder to avoid a loss than attain an equal gain ("endowment effect")
- Easy to create learned helplessness, hard to undo
- Negative interactions: more powerful than positive
- Negative experiences sift into implicit memory.
Negative Experiences Can Have Benefits

- A place for negative emotions:
  - Anxiety alerts us to inner and outer threats
  - Sorrow opens the heart
  - Remorse helps us steer a virtuous course
  - Anger highlights mistreatment; energizes to handle it

- Negative experiences can:
  - Increase tolerance for stress, emotional pain
  - Build grit, resilience, confidence
  - Increase compassion and tolerance for others
Health Consequences of Chronic Stress

Physical:
- Weakened immune system
- Inhibits GI system; reduced nutrient absorption
- Reduced, dysregulated reproductive hormones
- Increased vulnerabilities in cardiovascular system
- Disturbed nervous system

Mental:
- Lowers mood; increases pessimism
- Increases anxiety and irritability
- Increases learned helplessness (especially if no escape)
- Often reduces approach behaviors (less so for women)
- Primes aversion (due to SNS-HPAA negativity bias)
Vicious Cycles in the Brain

- Amygdala initiates stress response ("alarm bell")
- Hippocampus:
  - Forms and retrieves contextual memories
  - Inhibits the amygdala
  - Inhibits cortisol production
- Cortisol:
  - Stimulates and sensitizes the amygdala
  - Inhibits and can shrink the hippocampus
- Consequently, chronic negative experiences:
  - Sensitize the amygdala alarm bell
  - Weaken the hippocampus: this reduces memory capacities and the inhibition of amygdala and cortisol production
  - Thus creating vicious cycles in the NS, behavior, and mind
Vicious Cycles in the Brain

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A Major Result of the Negativity Bias: Threat Reactivity

- Two mistakes:
  - Thinking there is a tiger in the bushes when there isn’t one.
  - Thinking there is no tiger in the bushes when there is one.

- We evolved to make the first mistake a hundred times to avoid making the second mistake even once.

- This evolutionary tendency is intensified by temperament, personal history, culture, and politics.

- Threat reactivity affects individuals, couples, families, organizations, nations, and the world as a whole.
Results of Threat Reactivity (Personal, Organizational, National)

- Our initial appraisals are mistaken:
  - Overestimating threats
  - Underestimating opportunities
  - Underestimating inner and outer resources

- We update these appraisals with information that confirms them; we ignore, devalue, or alter information that doesn’t.

- Thus we end up with views of ourselves, others, and the world that are ignorant, selective, and distorted.
Costs of Threat Reactivity
(Personal, Organizational, National)

- Feeling threatened feels bad, and triggers stress consequences.
- We over-invest in threat protection.
- The boy who cried tiger: flooding with paper tigers makes it harder to see the real ones.
- Acting while feeling threatened leads to over-reactions, makes others feel threatened, and creates vicious cycles.
- The Approach system is inhibited, so we don’t pursue opportunities, play small, or give up too soon.
- In the Attach system, we bond tighter to “us,” with more fear and anger toward “them.”
The First and Second Dart

- The Buddha called unavoidable discomfort the “first dart.”

- Then we add our reactions to it, e.g., anger at hurt.

- Sometimes we react when there’s no first dart at all, simply a condition there’s no need to get upset about.

- And sometimes we react to positive events, such as a compliment or an opportunity.

- The Buddha called these reactions “second darts” - the ones we throw ourselves.
Adaptive and maladaptive responses to challenges


A Poignant Truth

Mother Nature is tilted toward producing gene copies.

But tilted against personal quality of life.

And at the societal level, we have caveman/cavewoman brains armed with nuclear weapons.

What shall we do?
We can deliberately use the mind to change the brain for the better.
Choices . . .

Or?

Reactive Mode

Responsive Mode
Cultivation
Just having positive experiences is not enough.

They pass through the brain like water through a sieve, while negative experiences are caught.

We need to engage positive experiences actively to weave them into the brain.
How to Take in the Good (TG)

1. **Have** a good experience.
   - You are already having one.
   - You deliberately recognize a good fact and let it become a good experience.

2. **Extend** the good experience in:
   - Time - for 10-20-30+ seconds
   - Space - in your body and feelings
   - Intensity - help it become stronger

3. **Absorb** the good experience by intending and sensing that is becoming a part of you, woven into the fabric of your brain and being.
Why It’s Good to Take in the Good

- Rights an unfair imbalance, given the negativity bias

- Increases resources, such as positive emotions and the capacity to manage stress and negative experiences

- Can help bring in missing “supplies” (e.g., love, strength, worth)

- Can lift mild to moderate depressed mood (though counterindicated for severe depression)

- Can help heal painful, even traumatic experiences

- Implicitly entails both a sense of agency and a stand that one’s own welfare matters
Instances of Taking in the Good

- You *notice* a good experience.

- You *create* a good experience by:
  - Looking for a good fact
  - Recalling a good fact
  - Creating a good fact
  - Imagining a good fact that has never been

- Situations:
  - On the fly
  - At specific times (e.g., meals, before bed)
  - When prompted (e.g., by a therapist)
Components of a Good Experience

- **Bodily states** - healthy arousal; PNS; vitality
- **Emotions** - both feelings and mood
- **Views** - expectations; object relations; perspectives on self, world, past and future
- **Behaviors** - repertoire; inclinations
Feeling Alright Right Now

- Tuning into bodily signals that you’re OK
- Recognizing protections
- Not afraid of paper tigers
- Feeling strong
Feeling Already Full

- Sensing enoughness for the body
- Feeling buoyed and nurtured by the natural world
- Awareness of phenomena filling the mind
- Feeling filled by each moment’s arisings even as they pass away.
As we evolved, we increasingly turned to and relied on others to feel safer and less threatened.

- Exile from the band was a death sentence in the Serengeti.
- Attachment: relying on the secure base
- The well-documented power of social support to buffer stress and aid recovery from painful experiences

Methods:

- Recognize it’s kind to others to feel cared about yourself.
- Look for occasions to feel cared about and take them in.
- Deliberately bring to mind the experience of being cared about in challenging situations.
Types of Good Facts

- **Conditions** (e.g., food, shelter, fresh air, friends, dog loves you, flowers blooming, ain’t dead yet)

- **Events** (e.g., finished a load of laundry, someone was friendly to you, this cookie tastes good)

- **Qualities within oneself** (e.g., fairness, decency, determination, good at baking, loving toward kids)
Types of Good Experiences

Avoiding Harms
- Feeling basically alright right now
- Feeling protected, strong, safe, at peace

Approaching Rewards
- Everyday sensual pleasures
- Satisfactions in accomplishing goals
- Feeling glad, grateful, contented, fulfilled
- Therapeutic, spiritual, or existential realizations

Attaching to Others
- Feeling included, seen, liked, appreciated, loved
- Feeling compassionate, kind, generous, loving
Obstructions to Taking in the Good

- General
  - Distractibility
  - Blocks to self-awareness in general

- Specific
  - Fears of losing one’s edge or lowering one’s guard
  - Sense of disloyalty to others (e.g., survivor guilt)
  - Culture (e.g., selfish, vain, sinful)
  - Gender style
  - Associations to painful states
  - Secondary gains in feeling bad
  - Not wanting to let someone off the hook
  - Thoughts that TG is craving that leads to suffering
Psychological Antidotes

Avoiding Harms
- Strength, efficacy --> Weakness, helplessness, pessimism
- Safety, security --> Alarm, anxiety
- Compassion for oneself and others --> Resentment, anger

Approaching Rewards
- Satisfaction, fulfillment --> Frustration, disappointment
- Gladness, gratitude --> Sadness, discontentment, “blues”

Attaching to “Us”
- Attunement, inclusion --> Not seen, rejected, left out
- Recognition, acknowledgement --> Inadequacy, shame
- Friendship, love --> Abandonment, feeling unloved or unlovable
Keep a green bough in your heart, and a singing bird will come.

Lao Tsu
Equanimity
Equanimity is a perfect, unshakeable balance of mind.
Nyanaponika Thera

With equanimity, you can deal with situations with calm and reason while keeping your inner happiness.
The Dalai Lama
Balanced, Steady, Present

- **Balance** - not reacting to fleeting experiences

- **Steadiness** - sustained through all circumstances

- **Presence** - engaged with the world but not troubled by it; guided by values and virtues, not reactions

The ancient circuitry of the brain continually triggers reactions. **Equanimity is the circuit breaker** that prevents the craving that leads to suffering.
Whose mind is like rock, steady, unmoved, dispassionate for things that spark passion, unangered by things that spark anger:

When one’s mind is developed like this, from where can there come suffering & stress?

The Buddha, Udāna 4.34
Indeed, the sage who’s fully quenched
Rests at ease in every way;
No sense desire adheres to him or her
Whose fires have cooled, deprived of fuel.

All attachments have been severed,
The heart’s been led away from pain;
Tranquil, he or she rests with utmost ease.
The mind has found its way to peace.

The Buddha
That which arises must pass away.

The Buddha
The Chain of Suffering

- **Contact**: An external or internal stimulus

- **Feeling**: The “hedonic tone” of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral; likes and dislikes

- **Craving**: Wanting what you like to continue and what you dislike to end; *tanha* - thirst - in Pali

- **Clinging**: The elaboration of craving

- **Suffering**: Discomfort related to wanting (e.g., tension, anxiety, pressure, frustration, disappointment, longing, sadness, remorse, anger)
The First and Second Dart

- The Buddha referred to unavoidable discomfort - including disease, old age, death, and sorrow at harms befalling others - as the “first dart.”

- Then we add our reactions to that first dart. For example, one could react to a physical pain with anxiety, then anger at oneself for feeling anxious, then sadness linked to not being comforted as a child.

- Sometimes we react with suffering when there is no first dart at all, simply a condition that there is no need to get upset about.

- And sometimes we react with suffering to positive events, such as a compliment or an opportunity.

- The Buddha called these reactions “second darts” - the ones we throw ourselves.
Disenchantment

- The brain routinely simulates possible events and the experiences you could have if they occur. This was a major evolutionary accomplishment that promoted planning and learning.

- But this also makes you suffer: it “enchants” you with exaggerated anticipated pleasures and pains, and makes you invest in strategies to deal with these.

- Instead, recognize the truth of your experience: pleasures are usually not that great and pains are usually not that bad. Intend to wake up from the spell.
First Aid for Upsets

- Pause
- Self-compassion
- Get on your own side
- Make a plan
- Take action - thought, word, and deed
The “rest-and-digest” parasympathetic nervous system (PNS) balances and dials down the “fight-or-flight” sympathetic nervous system.

It soothes, resets, renews the body-mind. Though the SNS gets more press, the PNS is more primary.
Cooling the Fires

- Recognize that stress is not good for you. Get on your own side to prevent and minimize it.

- Cultivate relaxation and calm in your resting state.

- When you get stressed, activating a PNS, “cooling” cascade:
  - Inhale super-fully; hold it; l-o-n-g exhalation; repeat
  - Relax the tongue
  - Touch the lips
  - Relax the body
Feeling Stronger and Safer

- Be mindful of an experience of strength (e.g., physical challenge, standing up for someone).

- Staying grounded in strength, let things come to you without shaking your roots, like a mighty tree in a storm.

- Be mindful of:
  - Protections (e.g., being in a safe place, imagining a shield)
  - People who care about you
  - Resources inside and outside you

- Let yourself feel as safe as you reasonably can:
  - Noticing any anxiety about feeling safer
  - Feeling more relaxed, tranquil, peaceful
  - Releasing bracing, guardedness, vigilance
A Serenity Prayer

May I find the serenity to accept the things that cannot be changed, the courage to change the things which should be changed, and the Wisdom to distinguish the one from the other.

Living one day at a time,
Enjoying one moment at a time,
Accepting hardship as a pathway to peace,
Taking this imperfect world as it is,
Not as I would have it,
Trusting in my refuges,
May I be reasonably happy in this life,
And supremely happy forever some day.

Adapted from the Serenity Prayer, by Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)
Liking and Wanting

- Distinct neural systems for liking and wanting

- In the brain: feeling/hedonic tone --> enjoying (liking) --> wanting --> pursuing
  - Wanting without liking is hell.
  - Liking without wanting is heaven.

- The distinction between *chandha* (wholesome wishes and aspirations) and *tanha* (craving)

- But beware: the brain usually wants (craves) and pursues (clings to) what it likes.
The Great Way is easy.

For one with no preferences.

Third Zen Patriarch
I make myself rich by making my wants few.

Henry David Thoreau
Practicing with Wanting

- Positive wants (e.g., practice, sobriety, love, aspirations) crowd out negative ones.

- Surround pleasant or unpleasant hedonic tones with spacious awareness - the “shock absorber” - without tipping into craving.

- Regard wants as just more mental content. Investigate them. Watch them come and go. No compulsion, no “must.”

- Be skeptical of predicted rewards - simplistic and inflated, from primitive subcortical regions. Explore healthy disenchantment.

- Pick a key want and just don’t do it.
Feeling Glad and Grateful

- What is already going alright in your life?
- What goals have you recently attained? What things have you recently accomplished?
- What are you glad about?
- What are you grateful for?
Flowers Pulling Weeds
Using Memory Mechanisms to Help Heal Painful Experiences

- The machinery of memory:
  - When explicit or implicit memory is reactivated, it is rebuilt from schematic elements, not retrieved in toto.
  - When attention moves on, the memory gets reconsolidated.

- The open processes of memory reactivation and reconsolidation create a window of opportunity for shaping your internal world.

- Reactivated material associates with other things in awareness, especially if they are prominent and lasting.

- When memory returns to storage, it takes associations with it.

- You can imbue memory with positive associations.
The Fourth Step of TIG

When you are having a positive experience:

- Sense the current positive experience sinking down into old pain, and soothing and replacing it.

When you are having a negative experience:

- Bring to mind a positive experience that is its antidote.

In both cases, have the positive experience be big and strong, in the forefront of awareness, while the negative experience is small and in the background.

You are not resisting negative experiences or getting attached to positive ones. You are being kind to yourself and cultivating positive resources in your mind.
All Four Steps of TIG

1. Have a good experience.
2. Extend the good experience.
3. Absorb the good experience.
4. Pair a good experience with negative material.

“HEAP”
TIG4 Capabilities, Resources, Skills

- **Capabilities:**
  - Dividing attention
  - Sustaining awareness of the negative material without getting sucked in (and even retraumatized)

- **Resources:**
  - Self-compassion
  - Internalized sense of affiliation

- **Skills:**
  - Internalizing “antidotes”
  - Accessing “the tip of the root”
TIG and Trauma

- General considerations:
  - People vary in their resources and their traumas.
  - Often the major action is with “failed protectors.”
  - Cautions for awareness of internal states, including positive
  - Respect “yellow lights” and the client’s pace.

- The first three steps of TIG are generally safe. Use them to build resources for tackling the trauma directly.

- As indicated, use the fourth step of TIG to address the peripheral features and themes of the trauma.

- Then, with care, use the fourth step to get at the heart of the trauma.
The Tip of the Root

For the fourth step of TIG, try to get at the youngest, most vulnerable layer of painful material.

The “tip of the root” is commonly in childhood. In general, the brain is most responsive to negative experiences in early childhood.

Prerequisites

- Understanding the need to get at younger layers
- Compassion and support for the inner child
- Capacity to “presence” young material without flooding
Feeding the Hungry Heart

Healthy development requires caregivers to give a child extensive mirroring, attunement, and prizing; healthy adult relationships require much the same.

These are normal “narcissistic supplies.” Deficits lead to:
- Feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, and shame
- Tendencies toward extremes of clinging or distance

As an adult, you can take in narcissistic supplies, gradually weaving them into your brain and your being.

This is not clinging to praise, etc. It is filling the hole in your heart so your happiness is increasingly unconditional - not dependent on external events.
Feeling Prized

- It is natural and important to feel that your person is special to others: appreciated, acknowledged, respected, cherished, prized.

- Bring to mind experiences of:
  - Being praised, complimented, acknowledged
  - A time you knew you were appreciated, perhaps after some contribution or generosity
  - Being wanted by someone; wanted by a group
  - Feeling cherished by someone

- In daily life, look for experiences of being prized, including in small ways, and then savor them so they sink in.
Feeling Like a Good Person

- Everyone has good qualities. No halo is required to have patience, determination, fairness, honesty, kindness, etc.

- Recognizing these qualities in yourself is simply seeing reality with clear eyes, just like recognizing good food in your cupboard or good qualities in another person.

- Methods:
  - Pick a good quality that you know you have.
  - Pay attention to any obstructions to recognizing and appreciating this good quality. Let them be . . . then let them go and return attention to the good quality.
  - Gather evidence for this good quality in you (e.g., examples).
  - Be mindful of what the good quality feels like in your body and mind; let it sink in.
  - Consider how this good quality contributes to yourself and others.
  - Open to a simple gladness for this good quality; let it sink in.
Your Loving Nature
The Social Brain

- Social capabilities have been a primary driver of brain evolution.

- Reptiles and fish avoid and approach. Mammals and birds *attach* as well - especially primates and humans.

- Mammals and birds have bigger brains than reptiles and fish.

- The more social the primate species, the bigger the cortex.

- Since the first hominids began making tools ~ 2.5 million years ago, the brain has roughly tripled in size, much of its build-out devoted to social functions (e.g., cooperative planning, empathy, language). The growing brain needed a longer childhood, which required greater pair bonding and band cohesion.
All sentient beings developed through natural selection in such a way that pleasant sensations serve as their guide, and especially the pleasure derived from sociability and from loving our families.

Charles Darwin
Ananda approached the Buddha and said, “Venerable sir, this is half of the spiritual life: good friendship, good companionship, good comradeship.”

“Not so, Ananda! Not so Ananda!” the Buddha replied. “This is the entire spiritual life. When you have a good friend, a good companion, a good comrade, it is to be expected that you will develop and cultivate the Noble Eightfold Path.”

[adapted from In the Buddha’s Words, Bhikkhu Bodhi]
In the cherry blossom’s shade
there is no thing
as a stranger

Issa
If there is anything I have learned about [people], it is that there is a deeper spirit of altruism than is ever evident.

Just as the rivers we see are minor compared to the underground streams, so, too, the idealism that is visible is minor compared to what people carry in their hearts unreleased or scarcely released.

(Hu)mankind is waiting and longing for those who can accomplish the task of untying what is knotted, and bringing these underground waters to the surface.

Albert Schweitzer
In between-family fights, the baboon’s ‘I’ expands to include all of her close kin; in within-family fights, it contracts to include only herself.

This explanation serves for baboons as much as for the Montagues and Capulets.

Dorothy Cheney and Robert Seyfarth
Us and Them

- Core evolutionary strategy: within-group cooperation, and between-group aggression.

- Both capacities and tendencies are hard-wired into our brains, ready for activation. And there is individual variation.

- Our biological nature is much more inclined toward cooperative sociability than toward aggression and indifference or cruelty. We are just very reactive to social distinctions and threats.

- That reactivity is intensified and often exploited by economic, cultural, and religious factors.

- Two wolves in your heart:
  - Love sees a vast circle in which all beings are “us.”
  - Hate sees a small circle of “us,” even only the self.

Which one will you feed?
Empathy, Compassion, and Kindness
What Is Empathy?

- It is sensing, feeling, and understanding how it is for the other person. In effect, you *simulate* his or her inner world.

- It involves (sometimes subtly) all of these elements:
  - Bodily resonance
  - Emotional attunement
  - Conceptual understanding

- Empathy is usually communicated, often tacitly.

- We can give empathy, we can receive it, and we can ask for it.
Neural Substrates of Empathy

- Three *simulating* systems:
  - **Actions**: “mirror” systems; temporal-parietal
  - **Feelings**: resonating emotionally; insula
  - **Thoughts**: “theory of mind”; prefrontal cortex

- These systems interact with each other through *association* and active *inquiry*.

- They produce an automatic, continual re-creation of aspects of others’ experience.
Empathy Skills

- Pay attention.
- Be open.
- Read emotion in face and eyes.
- Sense beneath the surface.
- Drop aversion (judgments, distaste, fear, anger, withdrawal).
- Investigate actively.

Express empathic understanding:
- Reflect the content
- Resonate with the tone and implicit material
- Questions are fine
- Offer respect and wise speech throughout
Reflections about Empathy

- You’re more likely to get empathy if you’re:
  - Open, present
  - Honest, real, authentic
  - Reasonably clear
  - Responsible for your own experience
  - Taking it in when you feel felt

- Empathy can be negotiated:
  - Name it as a topic in the relationship
  - Follow NVC format: “When X happens, I feel Y, because I need Z. So I request ______.”
  - Stay with it.
If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each [person's] life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm any hostility.

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow
A human being is a part of a whole, called by us “universe,” a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest... a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness.

This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and to affection for a few persons nearest to us.

Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature in its beauty.

Albert Einstein
The Buddha’s Words on Lovingkindness

Wishing: In gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease.

Omitting none, whether they are weak or strong, the great or the mighty, medium, short, or small, the seen and the unseen, those living near and far away, those born and to-be-born: May all beings be at ease.

Let none through anger or ill-will wish harm upon another. Even as a mother protects with her life her child, her only child, so with a boundless heart should one cherish all living beings; radiating kindness over the entire world: spreading upwards to the skies, and downwards to the depths, outwards and unbounded, freed from hatred and ill-will.

One should sustain this recollection.

This is said to be the sublime abiding.
When others address you, their speech may be timely or untimely, true or untrue, gentle or harsh, connected with good or harm, and connected with a mind of loving-kindness or inner hate.

You should train thus: My mind will remain unaffected, and I shall utter no evil words; I shall abide compassionate for their welfare, pervading them with a mind of loving-kindness, and pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind that is abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will.

Even if bandits were to sever you savagely limb by limb with a two-handed saw, anyone giving rise to a mind of hate would not be carrying out my teaching.

You should train thus: My mind will remain unaffected, and I shall utter no evil words; I shall abide compassionate for their welfare, pervading them with a mind of loving-kindness, and pervading the all-encompassing world with a mind that is abundant, exalted, immeasurable, without hostility and without ill will.
Lovingkindness Practice

- Types of wishes
  - Safety
  - Health
  - Happiness
  - Ease

- Types of beings
  - Self
  - Benefactor
  - Friend
  - Neutral
  - Difficult

- Continually “omitting none” in all directions
Strength with Heart
Wise Speech

- Well-intended
- True
- Beneficial
- Timely
- Expressed without harshness
- If possible: wanted
There are those who do not realize that one day we all must die.
But those who do realize this settle their quarrels.

The Buddha
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
Benefits of Unilateral Virtue

- It simplifies things: all you have to do is live by your own code, and others will do whatever they do.

- It feels good in its own right; it brings peace of mind, “the bliss of blamelessness.”

- It minimizes inflammatory triggers, and encourages good behavior in others.

- It stands you on the moral high ground.

- It teaches you what you can ask for from others.
Healthy Assertiveness

What it is: Speaking your truth and pursuing your aims in the context of relationships

What supports it:
- Being on your own side
- Self-compassion
- Naming the truth to yourself
- Refuges: Three Jewels, reason, love, nature, God
- Taking care of the big things so you don’t grumble about the little ones
- Health and vitality
Healthy Assertiveness: How to Do It - 1

- Know your aims; stay focused on the prize; lose battles to win wars

- Ground in empathy, compassion, and love

- Practice unilateral virtue
Healthy Assertiveness: How to Do It - 2

- Communicate for yourself, not to change others
  - Wise Speech; be especially mindful of tone
  - NVC: “When X happens, I feel Y because I need Z.”
  - Dignity and gravity
  - Distinguish empathy building (“Y”) from policy-making

- If appropriate, negotiate solutions
  - Establish facts as best you can (“X”)
  - Find the deepest wants (“Z”)
  - Focus mainly on “from now on”
  - Make clear plans, agreements
  - Scale relationships to their actual foundations
Feeding the Wolf of Love

- Focus on similarities between “us” and “them.”
- Consider others as young children.
- Notice good things about neutral or unpleasant people.
- Bring to mind the sense of someone who cares about you.
- Keep extending out the sense of “us” to include everyone.
- Consider others as your mother or dear friend in a past life.
- Restraint about over-identifying with “us”
- Reflect on the suffering of so many people in the world.
- Self-generate feelings of kindness and love.
So that all cubs are our own . . .
So that all beings are our clan . . .
   All life, our relatives . . .
   The whole earth, our home . . .

May you know love, joy, wonder, and wisdom,
   in this life, just as it is.

Thank you!
Penetrative insight
joined with calm abiding
utterly eradicates
afflicted states.

Shantideva
Great Books

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Key Papers - 2


- Hanson, R. 2008. Seven facts about the brain that incline the mind to joy. In *Measuring the immeasurable: The scientific case for spirituality.* Sounds True.


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