

Taking in the Good:

Weaving Positive Experiences Into Your Brain and Being

Sounds True

Wake Up Festival

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Think not lightly of good, saying, "It will not come to me."

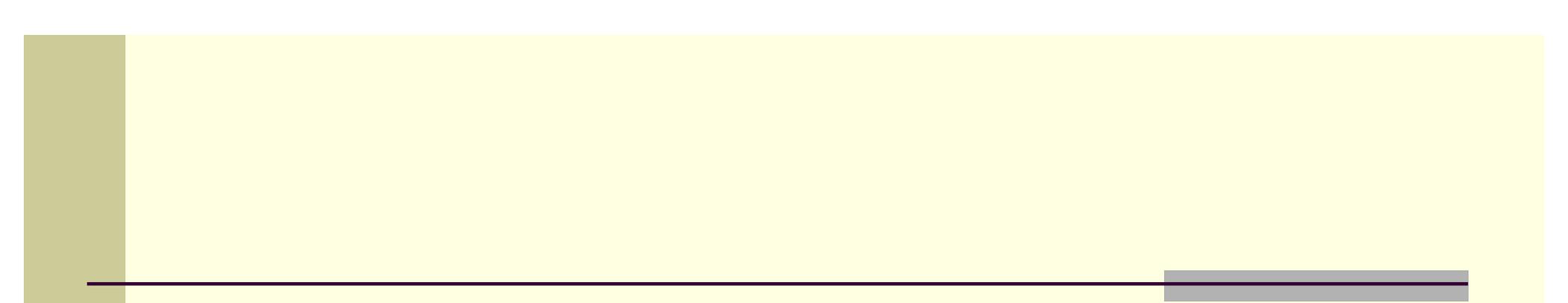
Drop by drop is the water pot filled.

Likewise, the wise one, gathering it little by little, fills oneself with good.

Dhammapada 9.122

Topics

- **Inner resources**
- **Turning mental states into neural traits**
- **Flowers pulling weeds**



Inner Resources

Causes and Effects

Mental and physical phenomena arise, persist, and pass away due to causes.

Causes in the brain are shaped by the mental/neural states that are activated and then installed within it.

As causes, inner “poisons” (e.g., hatred, greed, heartache, delusion) cause suffering and harm.

As causes, **inner resources** (e.g., peace, happiness, love, wisdom) cause happiness and benefit.



SPIRIT ROCK MEDITATION CENTER



Join us for

Cultivating Inner Strength - Monastic Daylong [Dana - No Fee Day]

with Ayya Anandabodhi
and Ayya Santacitta

on

Sunday, July 8

from 9:30 am - 5 pm.

(Photo by Ed Ritger)

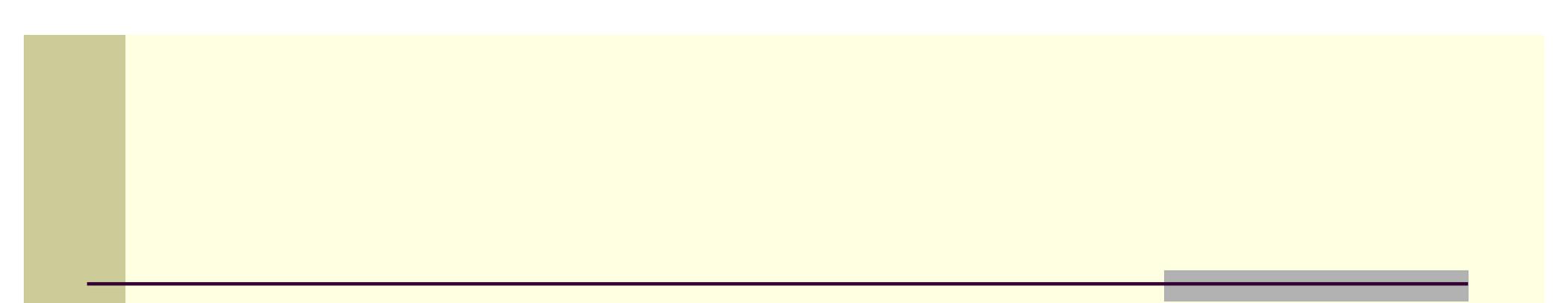
Inner Resources Include

- **Virtues** (e.g., patience, energy, generosity, restraint)
- **Executive functions** (e.g., meta-cognition)
- **Attitudes** (e.g., optimism, openness, confidence)
- **Capabilities** (e.g., mindfulness, emotional intelligence, resilience)
- **Positive emotions** (e.g., gratitude, self-compassion)
- **Approach orientation** (e.g., curiosity, exploration)

Cultivating Inner Resources

- Inner resources develop via pleasant and painful experiences, modeling, conceptualization, and practice.
- **Pleasant experiences** are a particularly powerful factor, e.g.:
 - Nurture child development
 - Encourage exploration and skill development
 - Help us endure the unpleasant and convert it to resources
 - Motivate us to continue learning
 - Initiate and sustain the Responsive mode
 - One can value pleasant experiences without craving them.
- The final common pathway of all these processes is the *installation* of the resource in neural structure.

**Given the negativity bias of the brain,
and its inefficiencies at transferring pleasant
experiences into implicit memory,
how can we strengthen the internalization
of inner resources?**



Turning Mental States into Neural Traits

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

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 Others

- Attunement, inclusion --> Not seen, rejected, left out
- Recognition, acknowledgement --> Inadequacy, shame
- Friendship, love --> Abandonment, feeling unloved or unlovable

TIG and Children

- All kids benefit from TIG.
- Particular benefits for mistreated, anxious, spirited/ “ADHD,” or LD children
- Adaptations:
 - Brief
 - Concrete
 - Natural occasions (e.g., bedtimes)



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

*Keep a green bough in your heart,
and a singing bird will come.*

Lao Tsu

Key Papers - 1

See www.RickHanson.net for other scientific papers.

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Key Papers - 2

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Key Papers - 3

- Lazar, S., Kerr, C., Wasserman, R., Gray, J., Greve, D., Treadway, M., McGarvey, M., Quinn, B., Dusek, J., Benson, H., Rauch, S., Moore, C., & Fischl, B. 2005. Meditation experience is associated with increased cortical thickness. *Neuroreport*. 16:1893-1897.
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- Lieberman, M.D. & Eisenberger, N.I. 2009. Pains and pleasures of social life. *Science*. 323:890-891.
- Lutz, A., Greischar, L., Rawlings, N., Ricard, M. and Davidson, R. 2004. Long-term meditators self-induce high-amplitude gamma synchrony during mental practice. *PNAS*. 101:16369-16373.
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Key Papers - 4

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- Takahashi, H., Kato, M., Matsuura, M., Mobbs, D., Suhara, T., & Okubo, Y. 2009. When your gain is my pain and your pain is my gain: Neural correlates of envy and schadenfreude. *Science*, 323:937-939.
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- Thompson, E. & Varela F.J. 2001. Radical embodiment: Neural dynamics and consciousness. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 5:418-425.
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