The Neurodharma of Love

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Rick Hanson, Ph.D.
Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom
www.RickHanson.net
An Introduction
Outstanding behavior, blameless action, open hands to all, and selfless giving:

This is a blessing supreme.

The Buddha
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
In the Garden of the Mind

1. Be with what is there
2. Decrease the negative
3. Increase the positive

Let be. Let go. Let in.
Mindfulness is present in all three.

“Being with” is primary – but not enough.
We also need “wise effort.”
Which Means Changing the Brain For the Better
Have It, Enjoy It
Keep a green bough in your heart, and a singing bird will come.

Lao Tzu
Our Relational Nature
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
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
Let’s sit a bit with the sense of all this.
Much that is beautiful . . .
and some that is challenging.
Rewards of Love
Pai: Dorsal anterior cingulate cortex (dACC), insula (Ins), somatosensory cortex (SSC), thalamus (Thal), periaqueductal gray (PAG).

Reward: Ventral tegmental area (VTA), ventral striatum (VS), ventromedial prefrontal cortex (VMPFC), and amygdala (Amyg).

Two Wolves in the Heart
A Secure Base
Balancing Autonomy and Intimacy

• Two great themes: independence/dependence, separation/joining, me/we

• They serve each other: autonomy helps you feel safe in the depths of intimacy, and intimacy nurtures the sense of worth and “secure base” that helps you explore life and dare greatly.

• When you feel autonomous and strong inside, you’re more able to manage differences and conflicts with others from the “green zone” without going “red” into fear, anger, and aggression.
Feeling Strong

• Bring to mind times that you felt strong, determined, enduring . . . Focus on feeling strong . . . Use HEAL to take in this experience.

• Bring to mind someone you are for. Find a sense of support, loyalty, perhaps fierce compassion . . . Know what this feels like – and apply it to yourself . . . Use HEAL to take in this experience.

• Imagine experiencing strength while dealing with a challenge . . . Let the sense of this sink into you.
The root of Buddhism is compassion, and the root of compassion is compassion for oneself.

Pema Chodren
Self-Compassion

• Bring to mind beings who care about you . . . Focus on feeling cared about. . . Use HEAL to take in this experience.

• Bring to mind beings for whom you have compassion . . . Receive the sense of compassion into yourself . . . Know what compassion feels like.

• Be aware of your own burdens, stresses, and suffering – and bring compassion to yourself . . . Get a sense of caring, warmth, support, compassion sinking deeply into you.
“Anthem”

Ring the bells that can still 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
Feeling of Worth

- It is natural and important to feel that you have worth as a person – which does not mean arrogance or ego.

You develop this sense of worth through:
- Others including, appreciating, liking, and loving you
- You respecting yourself

Take in experiences of being:
- Capable, skillful, talented, helpful
- Included, wanted, sought out
- Appreciated, acknowledged, respected
- Liked, befriended, supported
- Loved, cherished, special
A Confident Heart

• Feeling caring . . . And cared about.

• Stepping back and seeing yourself objectively . . . Recognizing your capabilities . . . Your good intentions . . . What you have been through and dealt with and overcome.

• Finding the respect for yourself that you would have for a person just like you . . . Letting go of needing to prove yourself or impress anyone . . . Recognizing your decency and efforts . . . Your good heart . . .
Warming the Heart
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.
Resting in Love

• Bring to mind beings you care about . . . Friends, family, pets, people who have helped you . . .

• Find compassion for their suffering . . .

• Find kindness and friendliness . . . The wish that they be happy . . . Feeling happy yourself about their happiness . . .

• Focus on feelings of caring and love . . . Let this experience sink into you as you sink into it.
Empathy
A human being is a part of a whole, called by us “universe,” a part limited in time and space. [We] experience [ourselves], [our] thoughts and feelings as something separated from the rest ... a kind of optical delusion of ... 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
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.
Pick a partner and choose an A and a B (A’s go first).

Then take turns, with one person speaking while the partner mainly listens, exploring this question:

**TIP:** If you’re alone, reflect or journal.

A’s: Can you share about a relationship issue?

B’s: Can you offer empathy?

A’s: Anything to clarify?

Then switch roles.
Unilateral Virtue
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
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
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.

The Buddha [adapted from The Simile of the Saw, trans. Bhikkhu Bodhi]
Right Speech

- Well-intended
- True
- Beneficial
- Timely
- Expressed without harshness
- And - ideally - wanted
Benefits of Unilateral Virtue

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

• It feels good in its own right.

• It minimizes inflammatory triggers, evokes good treatment, empowers you to ask for it.

• It stands you on the moral high ground.
Pick a partner and choose an A and a B (A’s go first).

Then take turns, with one person speaking while the partner mainly listens, exploring this question:

Can you explore the topic of unilateral virtue in one or more challenging relationships?

What specific changes might you make?

What benefits could these bring to you and others?

TIP: If you’re alone, reflect or journal.
“Us” and “Them”
Us and Them

• Within-group cooperation, and between-group aggression.
• 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?
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
Feeding the Wolf of Love

• Don’t over-identify with “us.”
• Release aversion to others.
• Focus on similarities between “us” and “them.”
• Recognize and have compassion for the suffering of “them.”
• Consider “them” as young children.
• Recognize good things about “them.”
• Keep extending out the sense of “us” to include everyone.
A Widening Circle

• Bring to mind beings you care about . . . Friends, family, pets, people who have helped you . . .

• Get a sense of “us” . . . Then bring more and more beings into that circle . . .

• Finding common ground . . . Widening the circle of “us” . . .

• Resting in the largest sense of “us” . . .
So that all cubs are our own . . .
All beings are our clan . . .
All life, our relatives . . .
The whole earth, our home . . .
Hug the Monkey
References
See RickHanson.net for other good books.

See www.RickHanson.net/key-papers/ for other suggested readings.


Suggested References - 2


• Dudai, Y. (2004). The neurobiology of consolidations, or, how stable is the engram?. Annu. Rev. Psychol., 55, 51-86.


Suggested References - 3


Suggested References - 4


Suggested References - 6


Healthy Assertiveness
Healthy Assertiveness

**What it is:**

Speaking your truth and pursuing your aims in the context of relationships.
Healthy Assertiveness

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

• Know your aims; stay focused on the prize; concede small points to gain on large ones

• 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
Healthy Assertiveness: How to Do It - 3

- 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