

“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

Not-Self in the Brain:

Insights from Neuroscience about Not Taking Life Personally

Spirit Rock Meditation Center

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Topics

- **Two truths**
- **Self in the mind**
- **Self in the brain**
- **Evolution of the apparent self**
- **Taking life less personally**
- **Fullness in the heart**
- **“Only the seen in the seen”**



Two Truths

Foundations

- Steady attention
- Being a body breathing
- Letting experiences arise and pass away
- Awareness of endings
- Awareness of arisings

*Impermanent are all compounded things.
When one perceives this with true insight,
Then one becomes detached from suffering.
This is the path of purification.*

The Buddha, Dhammapada 277

The Truth of Futility

- Experience - phenomenology - is impermanent, compounded, and insubstantial.
- Therefore, no experience can be a reliable, lasting basis of true happiness.
- Attempting to turn fluid experiences into static essences, and hold onto the ones we like, is doomed.
- This essentializing and grasping - craving and clinging, is also deeply frustrating: suffering.

The Truth of Fullness

- Even as each experience vanishes another one arises, consciousness endlessly renewed.
- The brain evolved to crave and suffer to pass on genes. The brain lies to us - “delusion” - in its motivational systems: Avoiding harms, Approaching rewards, and Attaching to others.
- Yet actually we are: alright right now; awash in enoughness; connected and loved.
- Through clear seeing and repeatedly taking in the good, you can internalize this experience of feeling already full.
- There is no basis for craving and clinging, suffering and harm.

The truth of futility is that craving is hopeless.

The truth of fullness is that craving is unnecessary.

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. Enrich 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.

*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

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.

*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

*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

Coming Home . . .

Peace

Contentment

Love

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

Lao Tsu

“Self” in the Mind

Definitions

- **Person** - The body-mind as a whole
 - Contains knowledge, personal memories, skills, temperament, personality tendencies, mood, etc.
 - Has considerable consistency over time
 - Deserves kindness and justice; is morally culpable
- **Self** - “I, me, and mine”
 - Psychological self; the “I” in “I am happy, I want a cookie, I know $2+2=4$, I am for justice”; the “me” in “Do you love me?”
 - The apparent owner of experiences and agent of actions
- **Awareness** - The field in which the mind (as yet mysteriously) represents aspects of the mind to itself
 - “Global workspace” in which representations of the person, self-related functions, and subjectivity arise and pass away ¹⁸

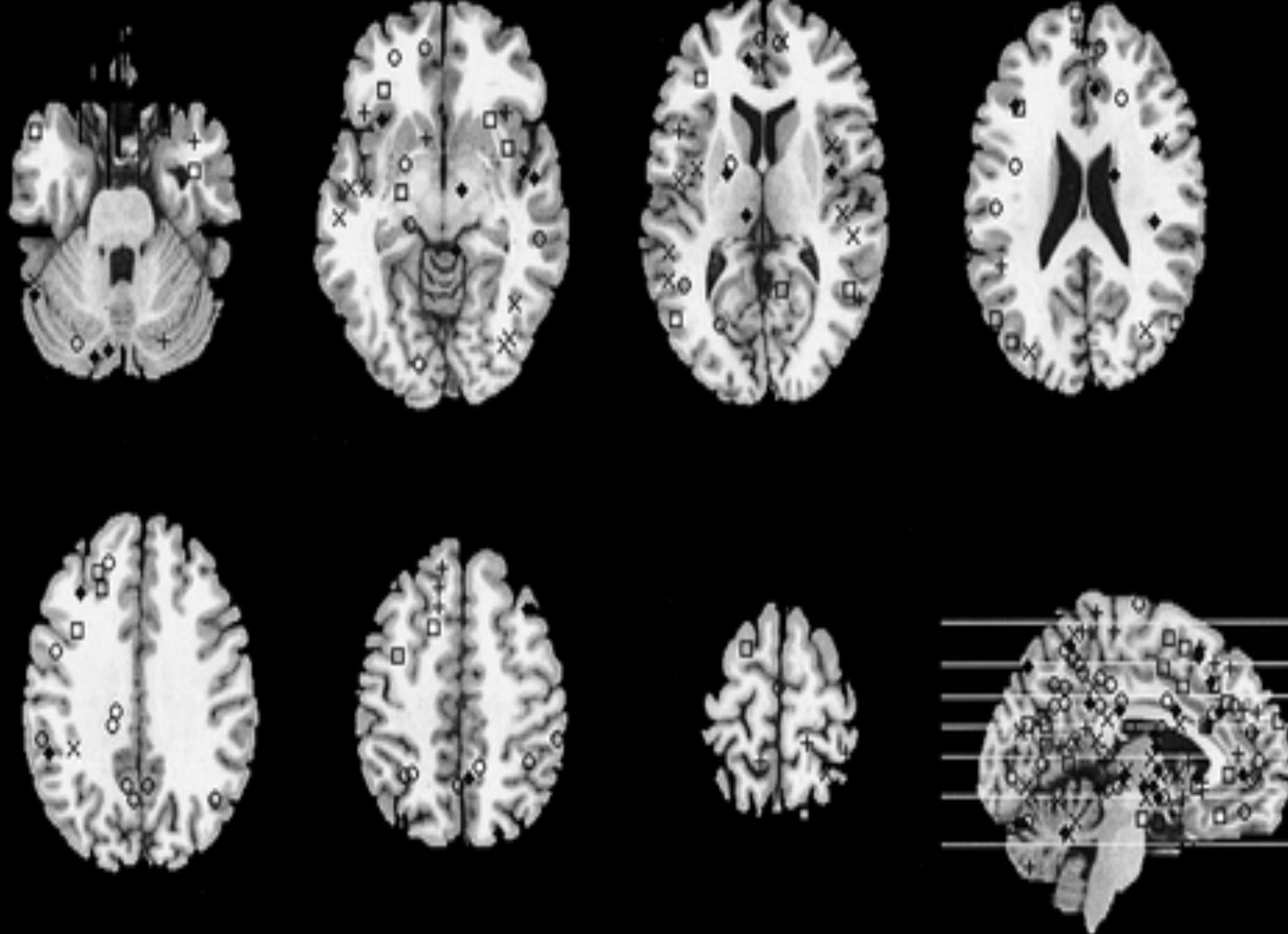
Conventional Notions of “Self”

- **Unified** - coherent; just one; a being, an entity; some one looking out through your eyes.
- **Stable** - unchanging in its fundamentals; the core self as a child still feels present in you today
- **Independent** - things happen to the self, but it remains free of their effects in its essence.
- **Identity** - That which one is; that with which there is the greatest identification

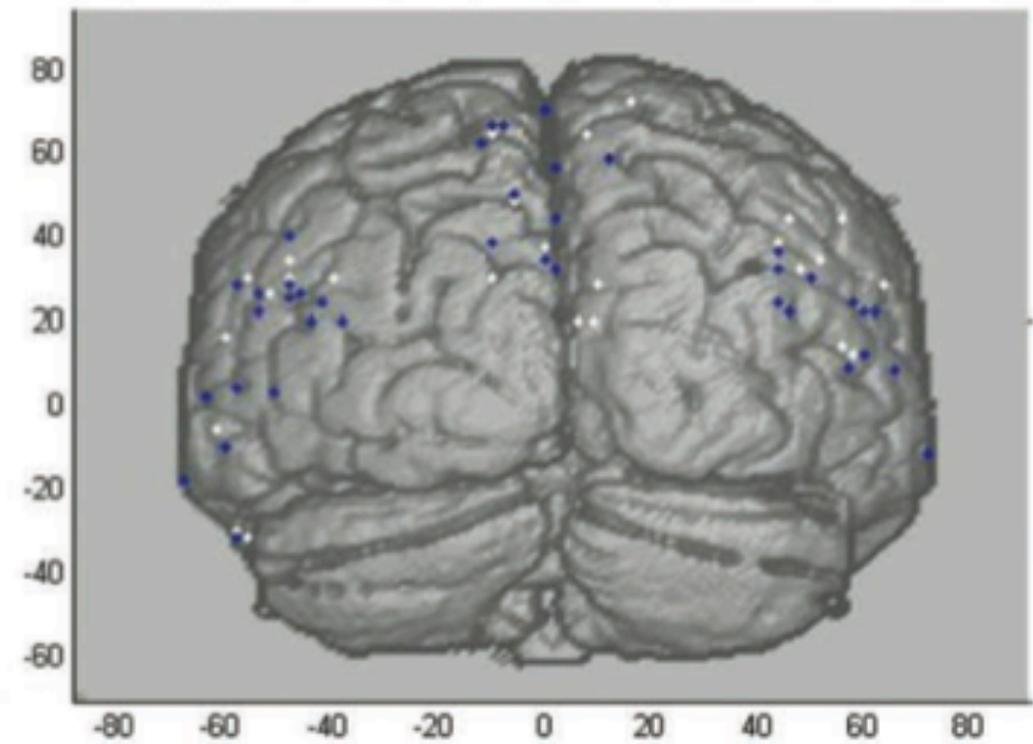
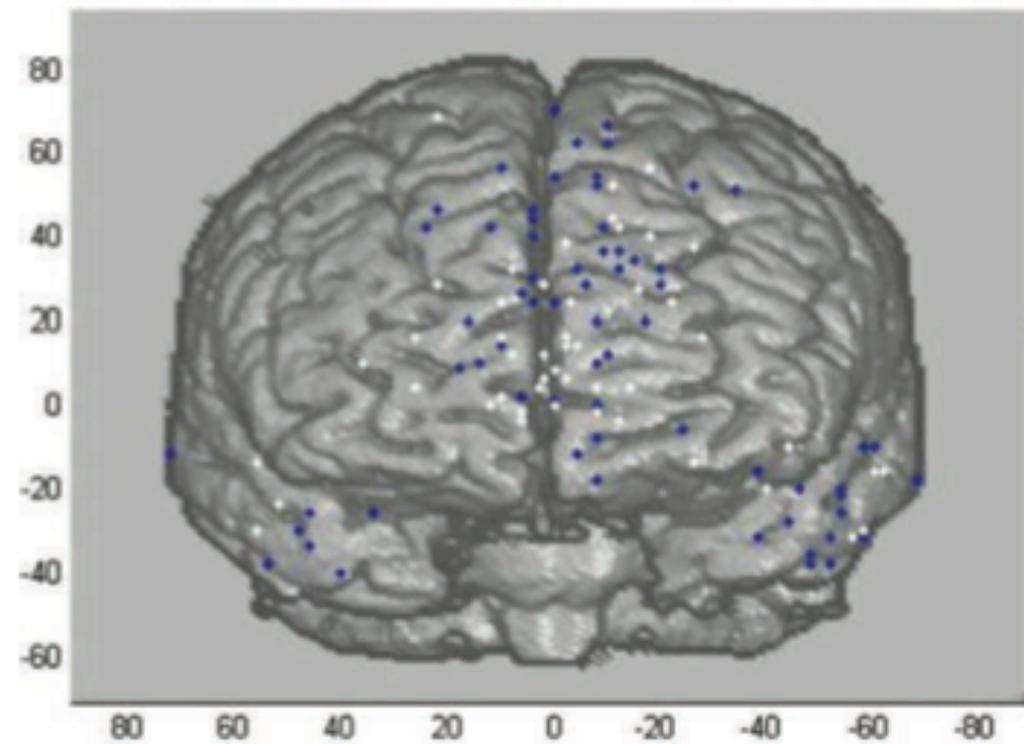
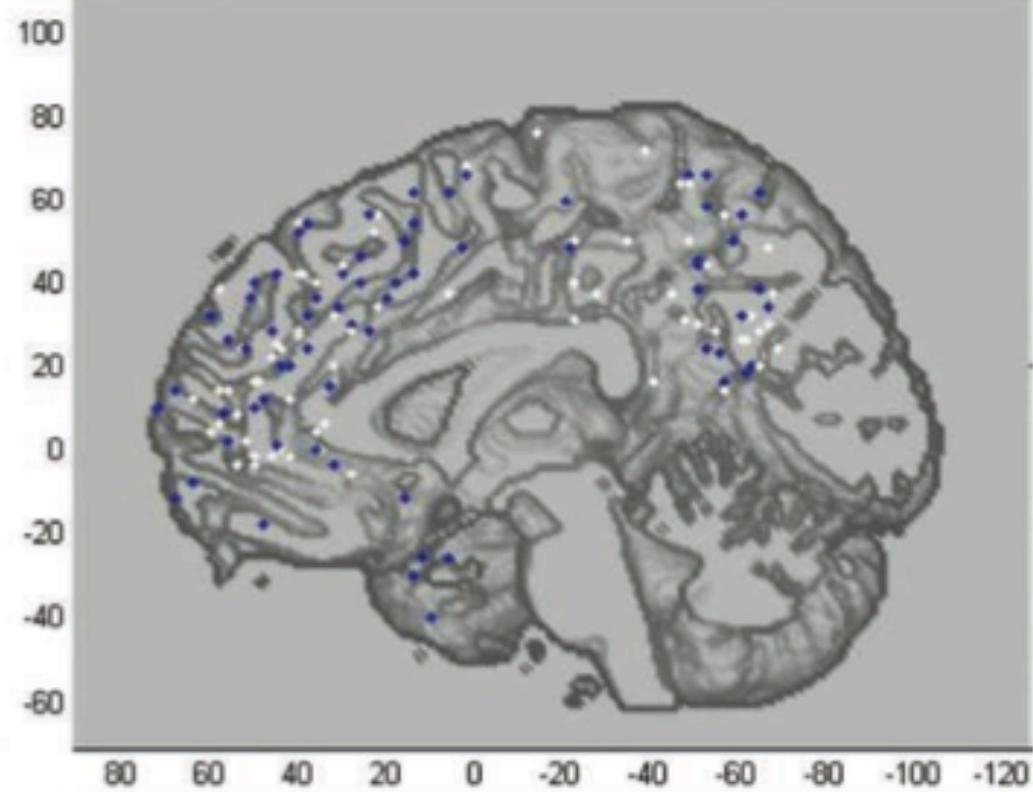
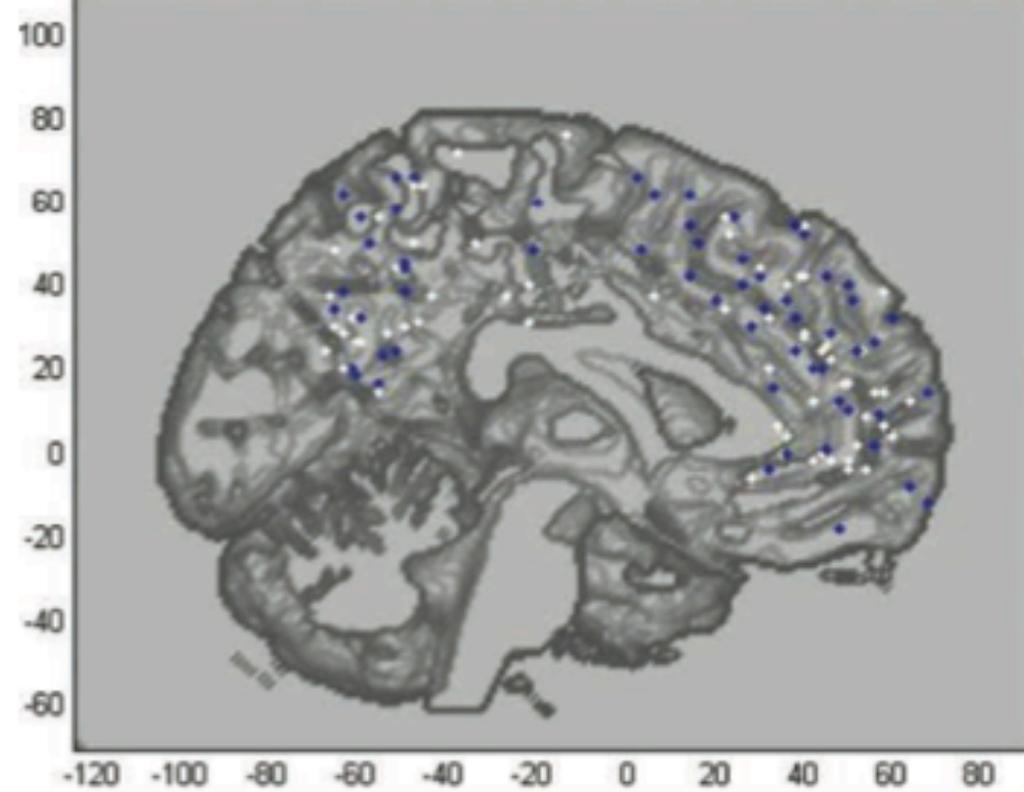
Actual Experience of “Self”

- **Compounded** – Made up of many parts; one self vows to exercise early, another self turns off the alarm clock
- **Impermanent** – More or less present at different times; different aspects come forward at different times
- **Dependent** – Developed in interactions with caregivers and peers and encounters with the world; grounded in evolution; activating and deactivating as a means to the ends of the organism; especially responsive to opportunities and threats; self organizes around clinging; there is a process of *selfing* rather than a static, fixed, unchanging entity.
- **Part of the person** – There is awareness of aspects of self as contents within awareness like any others.

“Self” in the Brain



Brain activations of “selfing” - Gillihan, et al., *Psych Bulletin*, 1/2005



Logrand and Ruby, 2009. What is self specific? [White = self; blue = other]

Properties of Self in Your Brain

- **Compounded** – Distributed systems and sub-systems; no homunculus looking through your eyes
- **Impermanent** – Circuits light up and deactivate; fluid, transient
- **Dependent** – Dependent on neural structures and processes; dependent on the evolution of specialized neural tissues (e.g., spindle cells); responsive to stimuli;
- **Part of the person** – Self-related activations in neural circuitry are just a tiny fraction of the total activations in the brain
 - The neural circuitry associated with self representations or functions also performs many other activities unrelated to self.
 - In the brain, self is not special.

Subjectivity Doesn't Equal a Subject

- Ordinary awareness has an inherent subjectivity, a localization to a particular perspective (e.g., to my body, not yours).
- The brain indexes across experiences of subjectivity to create an apparent subject.
- That apparent subject is elaborated and layered through the maturation of the brain, notably regions of the prefrontal cortex.
- But there is no subject *inherent* in subjectivity!
- Awareness requires subjectivity, but not a subject

What Self?

In sum, from a neurological standpoint, the everyday feeling of being a unified self is an utter illusion:

- The apparently coherent and solid “I” is actually built from many neural subsystems, with no fixed center.
- The apparently stable “I” is produced by variable and transient activations of neural circuits.
- The apparently independent “I” depends on neural circuitry, the evolutionary processes that built them, critical interactions with others to shape those circuits, and the stimuli of the moment.

Neurologically, self is “empty” - without absolute, inherent existence.

Self Is Like a Unicorn

- Self-related patterns of information and neural activity are as real as those that underlie the smell of roses.
- But that which they point to – a unified, enduring, independent “I” – just doesn’t exist.
- Just because we have a sense of self does not mean that we are a self. The brain strings together heterogenous moments of self-ing and subjectivity into an illusion of homogenous coherence and continuity.
- Real representations in the brain of a horse point to something that is also real. But the real representations of a unicorn in the brain point to something that is not real.
- The real representations of the self in the brain point to another mythical creature: the apparent self²⁷

Evolution of the Apparent “Self”

“Self” as Adaptation for Survival

- Motivates fierce effort to survive
- Adds verve and commitment to relationships
- “Self”-related processes helped our ancestors succeed in increasingly social hunter-gatherer bands in which interpersonal dynamics played a strong role in survival.
- The evolution of relationships fostered the evolution of the apparent “self” and *vice versa*; the benefits of the illusion of “self” have been a factor in the evolution of the brain.
- The persistent illusion of a “self” has been stitched into human DNA by reproductive advantages slowly accumulating across a hundred thousand generations.

The dualistic ego-mind is essentially a survival mechanism, on a par with the fangs, claws, stingers, scales, shells, and quills that other animals use to protect themselves.

By maintaining a separate self-sense, it attempts to provide a haven of security.

Yet the very boundaries that create a sense of safety also leave us feeling cut off and disconnected.

Selfing Leads to Suffering

- When “I, me, and mine” are mental objects like any other, there’s no problem.
 - For example, the Buddha routinely used “I” and “you.”
- But when we privilege self-representations through identifying with them or defending or glorifying them . . . Then we suffer, and create suffering for others.
- The key is to be able to move dextrously into and back out of self-representations; that’s skillful means.

*No self,
no problem*

*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

Penetrative insight

joined with calm abiding

utterly eradicates

afflicted states.

Shantideva



Takng Life Less Personally

Relaxing Selfing: Perspectives

- You need a coherence of person to relax selfing.
- Cautions: dissociative disorders; borderline personality disorder; “spacey, airy” people
- Distinguish between the person (the body-mind as a whole) and the apparent self (the supposedly unified, stable, and independent owner of experiences and agent of actions).
- Enjoy the peace of less selfing.

Using Mindfulness to Relax Selfing

- Notice how little “I” there is in many activities (e.g., reaching for salt, cuddling); take in that sense of minimal selfing combined with life being OK.
- Notice how “I” changes; see how it grows in response to threats, opportunities, and contact with others; consider the apparent “I” as a process rather than as an being.
- Focus on present moment experience as a process.
- Be mindful of yourself as the protagonist in the “mini-movies” running in the mind.
- Beware presuming that others are intentionally targeting you.³⁸



Fullness in the Heart

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 in them lead to:
 - Feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, and shame
 - Lots and lots of “self-ing”
- As an adult, you can take in experiences of feeling cared about, gradually weaving them into your brain and 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.

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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.

*The root of Buddhism is compassion,
and the root of compassion is compassion for oneself.*

Pema Chodron

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

Feeling Prized

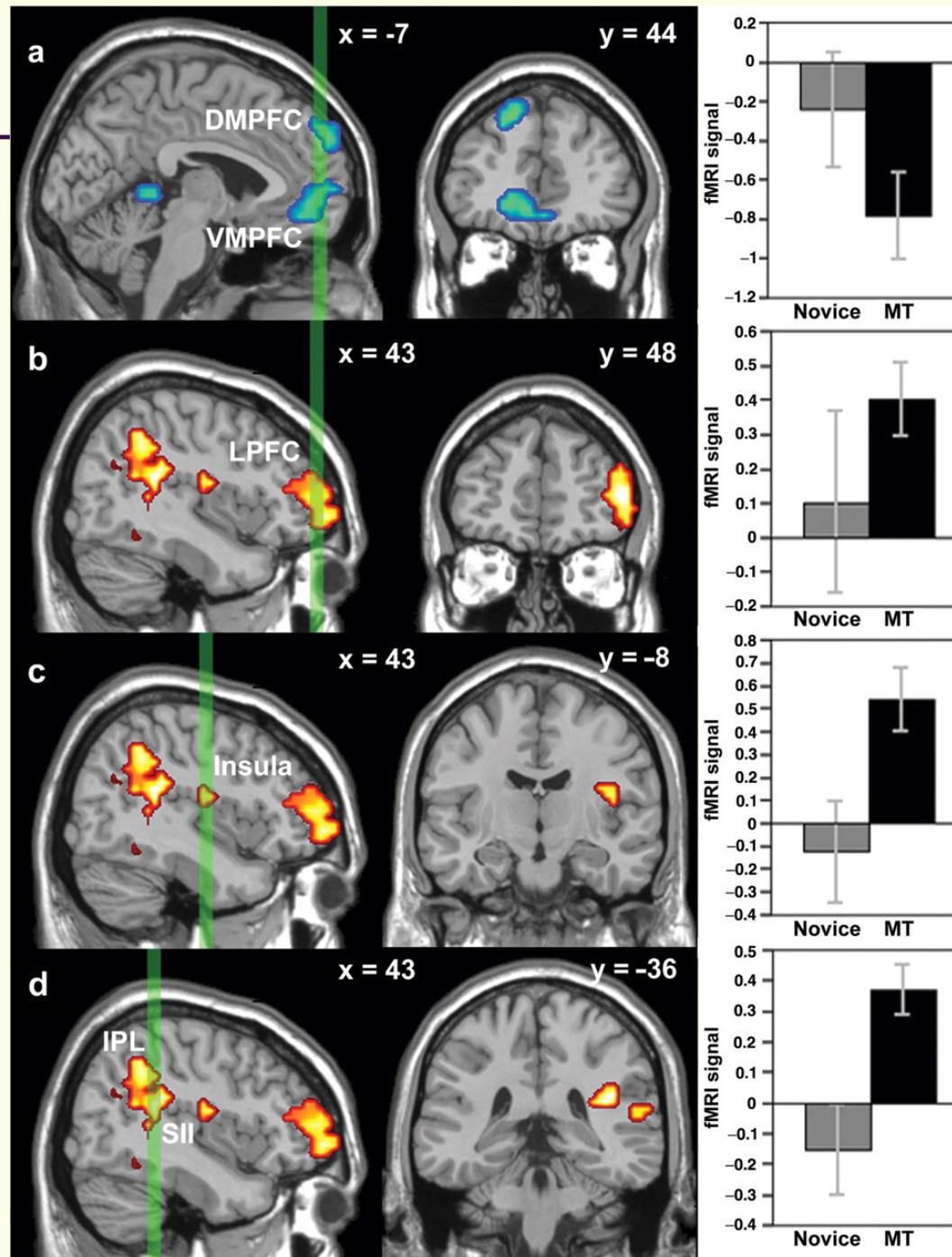
- It is natural and important to feel that your person is special to others: appreciated, acknowledged, respected, cherished, prized.
- Bring to mind experiences of:
 - Being praised, complimented, acknowledged
 - A time you knew you were appreciated, perhaps after some contribution or generosity
 - 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, curiosity, 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 others.
 - Open to a simple gladness for this good quality; let it sink in.

“Only the Seen in the Seen . . .”

Self-Focused (blue) vs Open Awareness (red) Conditions (following 8 weeks of MT)



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.

Liking and Wanting

- Distinct neural systems for liking and wanting
- In the brain: feeling 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.

“Bahiya, you should train yourself thus.”

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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.

*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

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?

Suggested Books

See www.RickHanson.net for other great books.

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- Begley, S. 2007. *Train Your Mind, Change Your Brain*. Ballantine.
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- Linden, D. 2008. *The Accidental Mind*. Belknap.
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See www.RickHanson.net for other scientific papers.

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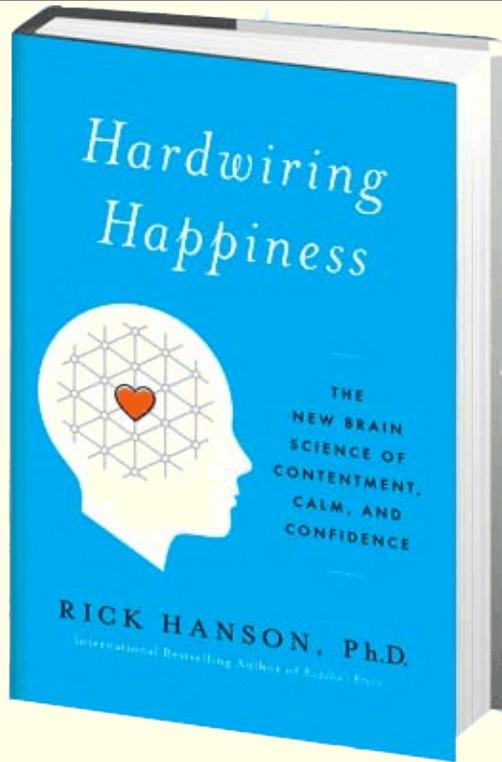
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Where to Find Rick Hanson Online



Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence

www.rickhanson.net/hardwiringhappiness

Personal website: www.rickhanson.net

Wellspring Institute: www.wisebrain.org