

The Neurodharma of Love:

***Using Buddhist Wisdom and Brain Science
To Illuminate the Heart
Of Important Relationships***

Spirit Rock Meditation Center

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Topics

- **A Dharma of Love**
- **Inner Strength**
- **The Natural Mind**
- **Your Loving Nature**
- **Two Wolves in the Heart**
- **Empathy**
- **Compassion and Lovingkindness**
- **Unilateral Virtue**
- **Kindness and Assertiveness**



A Dharma of Love

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]

*If people knew, as I know, the results of giving and sharing,
they would not eat without having given,
nor would they allow the stain of niggardliness
to obsess them and root in their minds.*


*Even if it were their last morsel, their last mouthful,
they would not eat without having shared it,
if there were someone to share it with.*

The Buddha






Inner Strength



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



Pema Chodren

Self-Compassion

- Compassion is the wish that someone not suffer, combined with feelings of sympathetic concern. Self-compassion simply applies that to oneself. It is not self-pity, complaining, or wallowing in pain.
- Self-compassion is a major area of research, with studies showing that it 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 focus of 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 Natural Mind



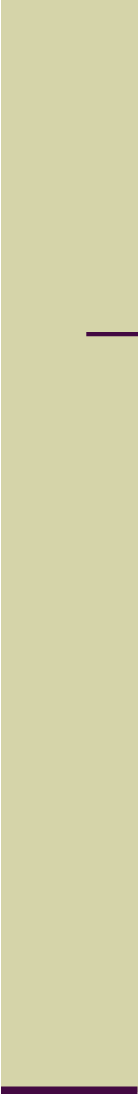
Apart from the hypothetical influence of a
transcendental X factor . . .


Awareness and unconsciousness, mindfulness
and delusion, and happiness and suffering
must be natural processes.

Mind is grounded in life.

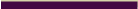


**Mental activity entails
underlying neural activity.**





**Repeated mental activity entails
repeated neural activity.**



**Repeated neural activity
builds neural structure.**

A microscopic image of neurons, showing a central neuron with a glowing green nucleus and numerous yellow, branching axons extending across the field of view. The background is dark, and the overall color palette is dominated by yellow and green.

Neurons that fire together,

wire together.

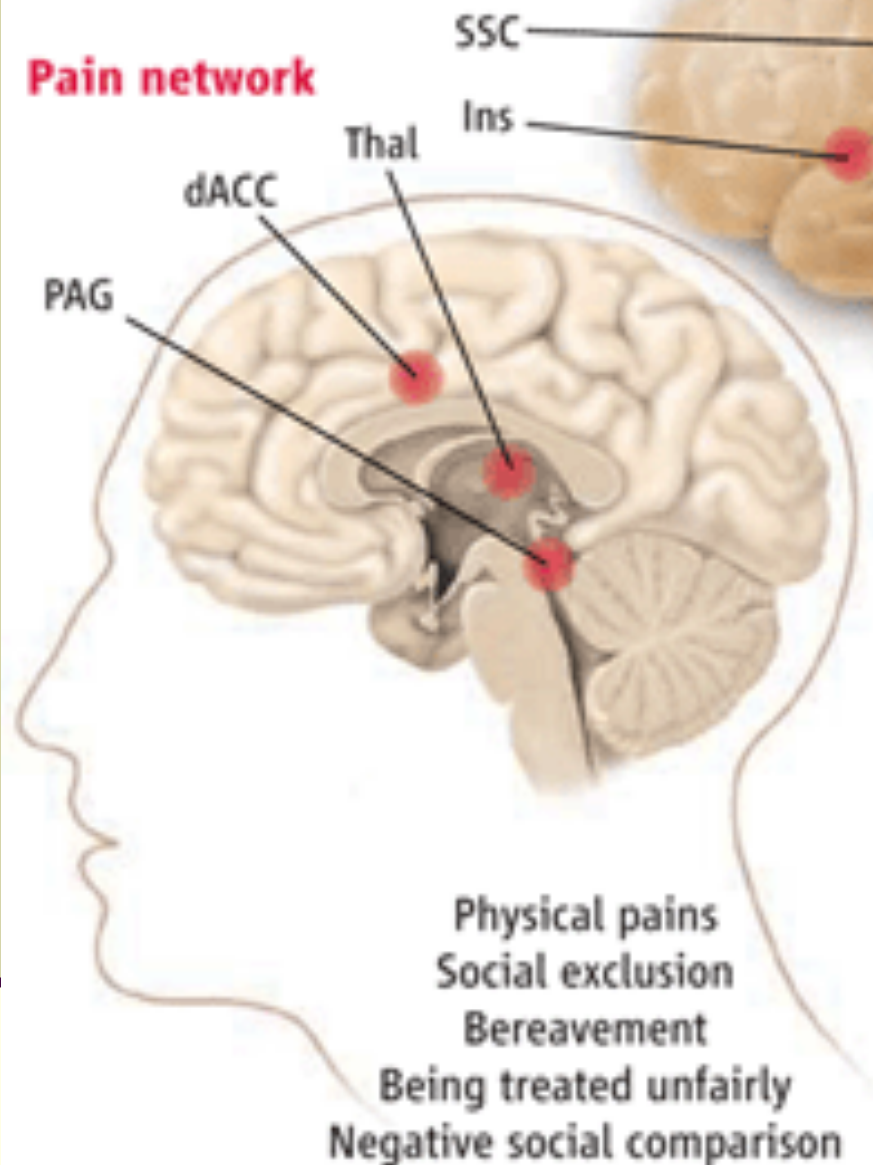


Your Loving Nature

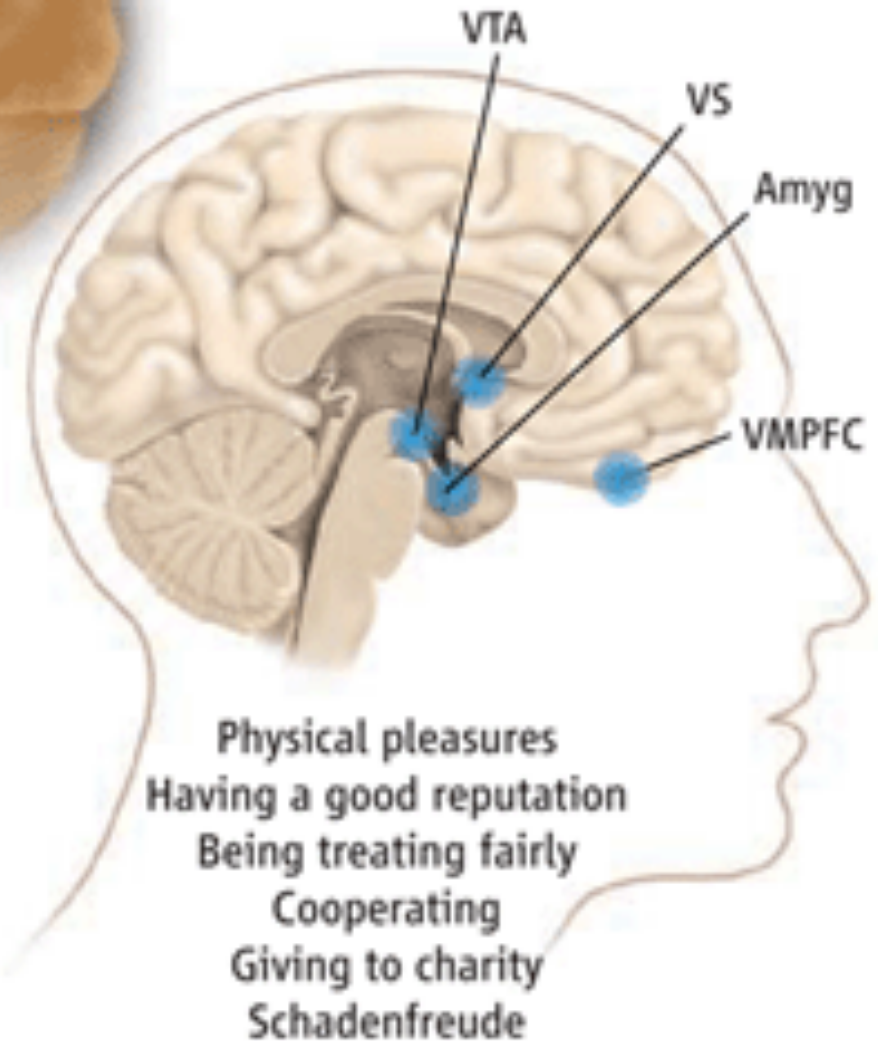
Biological Evolution

- 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: diverged from chimpanzees
- 2.5 million years of tool-making
- 150,000 years of *homo sapiens*

Pain network



Reward network




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

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







































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









Two Wolves in the Heart

Two wolves in the heart



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?

*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

The Opportunity

We can use the mind


To change the brain

To change the mind for the better

To benefit ourselves and other beings.

Feeling Strong

- Relaxed, resting in awareness
- Feeling the strength in awareness itself
- Energy and strength in your breathing . . . in arms and legs . . . in your whole being . . .
- A spacious strength that lets others flow through
- In relationship and at peace



*Outstanding behavior,
blameless action,
open hands to all,
and selfless giving:*

This is a blessing supreme.

The Buddha



Empathy

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

- Sustain attention.
- Be open.
- Read emotion in face and eyes.
- Sense beneath the surface.
- Detach from aversion (judgments, 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



*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



Compassion and Lovingkindness

The Wisdom of Connection

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



From the Buddhist Lovingkindness Sutra

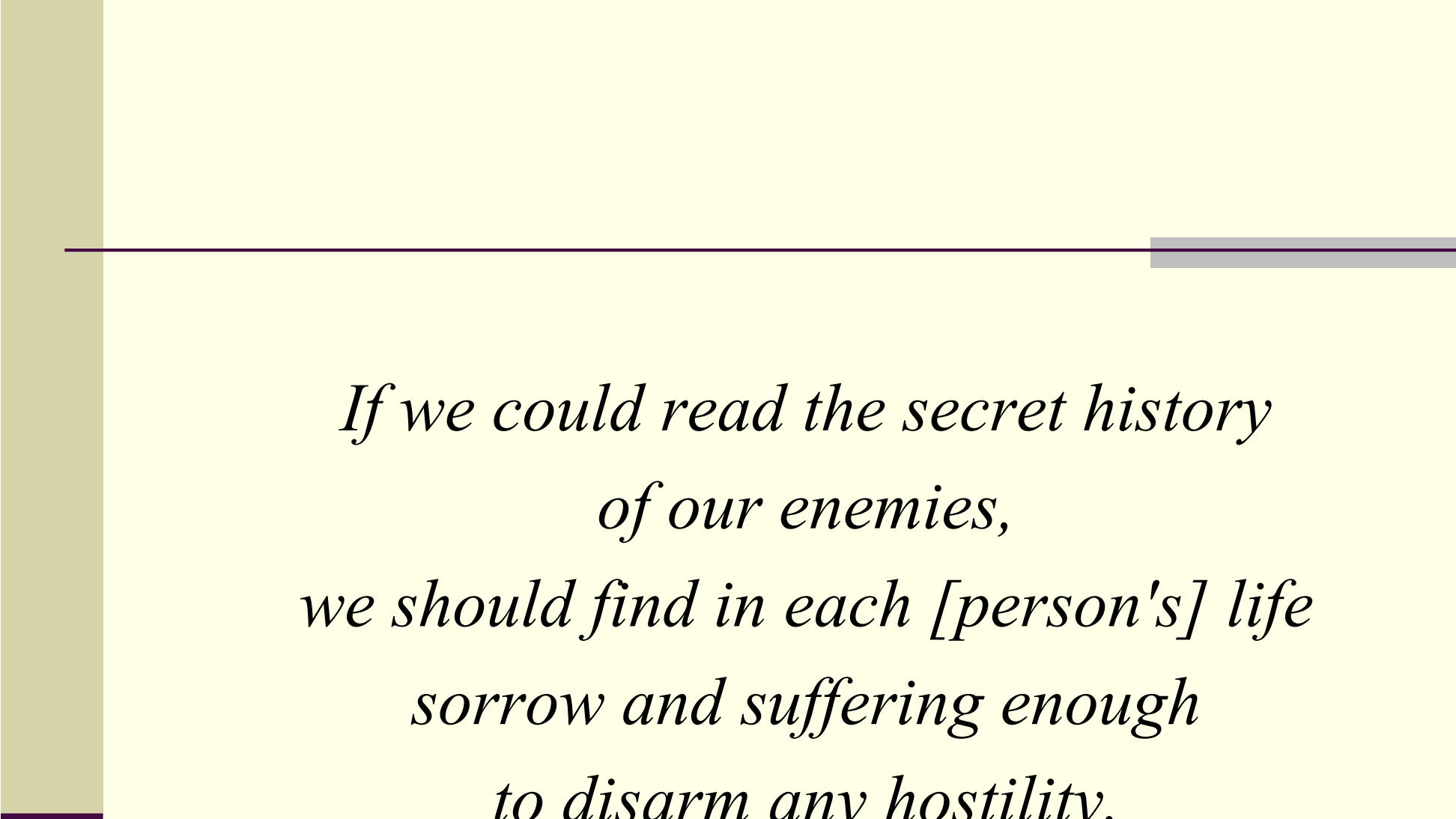
Wishing: In gladness and in safety, may all beings be at ease.

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.

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*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

Growing Compassion

- Compassion is the wish that a being not suffer, usually with feelings of warmth and concern.
- Beings: benefactor, friend, neutral, self, difficult
- Factors:
 - Distress tolerance, can allow “suffering with”
 - Not caught up in feeling threatened
 - Seeing commonalities with the other being
 - Separating compassion from moral judgment
 - Seeing the child in the other person

Lovingkindness Practice

- Types of wishes
 - Safety
 - Health
 - Happiness
 - Ease
- Types of beings
 - Self
 - Benefactor
 - Friend
 - Neutral
 - Difficult
- Continually “omitting none” in all directions




Unilateral Virtue

Wisdom is . . . all about understanding the underlying spacious and empty quality of the person and of all experienced phenomena.

To attain this quality of deep insight, we must have a mind that is quiet and malleable.

Achieving such a state of mind requires that we first develop the ability to regulate our body and speech so as to cause no conflict.

Venerable Ani Tenzin Palmo



*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

*Whoever takes a stick to beings desiring ease,
when one is looking for ease,
will meet with no ease after death.*

*Whoever doesn't take a stick to beings desiring ease,
when one is looking for ease,
will meet with ease after death.*

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

The Buddha's Advice to His Son

Rahula, when you wish to do an action of body, speech, or thought, you should reflect thus: Would this action lead to my own affliction, or to the affliction of others, or the affliction of both? Is it an unwholesome action with painful results?

If you know that this action would lead to affliction, that it is an unwholesome action with painful results, then you definitely should not do such an action.

But when you reflect, if you know that this action would not lead to affliction, that it is a wholesome action with pleasant results, then you may do such an action.

Rahula, while you are doing an action, you should reflect [in the same way] and [make the same choice].

Also, Rahula, after you have done an action, you should reflect [in the same way]. If you know [the action led to affliction, was unwholesome, had painful results], you should confess such an action, reveal it, and lay it open to a teacher or to your wise companions in the holy life, [and] you should undertake restraint in the future.

But when you reflect, if you know that this action did not lead to affliction, that it was a wholesome action with pleasant results, you can abide happy and glad, training day and night in wholesome states.

Therefore, Rahula, you should train thus: “We will purify our bodily actions, our verbal actions, and our mental actions by repeatedly reflecting upon them.”

Adapted from Majjhima Nikaya 61, (Bhikkhu Bodhi translator)

Buddhist Relationship Virtues

- These are aids to practice, not rules that are a sin to break.
- The Five Precepts: Do not kill, steal, create harms through sexuality, lie, or abuse intoxicants.
- Right Livelihood: Do not trade in weapons, living beings, meat, intoxicants, or poisons.
- Right Speech: Say only what is well-intended, true, beneficial, timely, expressed without harshness, and - ideally - wanted.
- The fundamental principle of non-harming . . . including oneself

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-handled 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]

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.

Remaining virtuous in the face of provocation is a profound expression of non-harming and benevolence.

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Kindness and Assertiveness

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



So that all cubs are our own . . .

All beings are our clan . . .

All life, our relatives . . .

The whole earth, our home . . .





Great Books

See www.RickHanson.net for other great books.

- Austin, J. 2009. *Selfless Insight*. MIT Press.
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Key Papers - 1

See www.RickHanson.net for other scientific papers.

- Atmanspacher, H. & Graben, P. 2007. Contextual emergence of mental states from neurodynamics. *Chaos & Complexity Letters*, 2:151-168.
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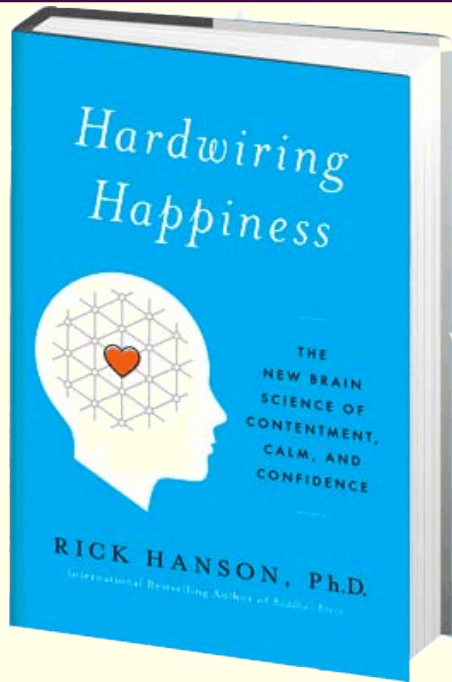
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Where to Find Rick Hanson Online



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



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