



# The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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## *Slowing Down the Consumer Treadmill*

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When I suggest to people that mindfulness can help us deal with climate change, one of the reactions is, *Do you mean to tell me that if I close my eyes and meditate, the carbon in the atmosphere will magically disappear?*

No, it doesn't work through magic. When we become more mindful, we're more aware of our buying habits and how they affect the planet. We delight in what we already have and feel fewer cravings to acquire more. After all, the product with the least impact on the environment is the one that does not have to be manufactured.

The Earth's climate is heating up. This change is being driven by carbon dioxide released through burning fossil fuels like coal, oil and natural gas. Legislation to deal with the problem has been rejected by the U.S. Congress. Some people put their hopes in the development of more energy-efficient technologies. However,

## Greetings

The Wise Brain Bulletin offers skillful means from brain science and contemplative practice – to nurture your brain for the benefit of yourself and everyone you touch.

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Boston College economist Juliet Schor warns that growth in consumption has been outpacing efficiency improvements. “We get more efficient, but that makes people want to buy more energy, because it’s effectively cheaper,” she told me. “So you have to control the demand.”

But people typically don’t want less; they want more. Fear of losing what’s essential to one’s happiness causes resistance to the changes needed to protect the climate—it may, in fact be what drives some people to even deny the reality of climate change. What if we could offer the prospect of more satisfaction, but in a form that was less damaging to the planet? People could have more of what they really want—to feel good—while purchasing fewer things that depend on atmosphere-polluting industries. The poet Allen Ginsberg had this in mind, in a letter to the Wall Street Journal that commented on American acquisitiveness, when he observed,

“You own twice as much rug if you’re twice as aware of the rug.”

Consider this paradox. Although the real, inflation-adjusted income of Americans doubled between 1960 and 1990, the proportion of Americans describing themselves as “very happy” remained at about one-third throughout that period. Yet mainstream economists continue to assume that economic growth is the foundation of wellbeing. In the last thirty years Americans have even been increasing their work hours in order to buy more goods, but as a group we feel no better off. The irony might merely be amusing if manufacturing were pollution-free. Instead, this futile effort is heating up the world.

Psychologists call the phenomenon of chasing after rewards that don’t provide

lasting satisfaction the “hedonic treadmill.” A classic example emerged in research showing that people who won big lottery prizes gained an initial bump up in their happiness, but a year later were no happier than before. Why doesn’t more wealth bring more happiness? University of California psychologist Sonja Lyubomirsky writes in her 2007 book, *The How of Happiness*, that among people who live in affluent societies, happiness is due less to life events than to genes and habitual ways of looking at the world.

The compulsion to acquire possessions has often been compared to an addiction. Just as addicts need more and more of their drug to get the same level of pleasure, Americans buy more and more stuff to maintain the same level of satisfaction. This is more than a clever metaphor. Addictions are deformations of a brain system that governs rewards and habits by releasing substances such as dopamine and the internal opioids that are responsible for cravings and “highs.”



The reward system responds strongly to novelty. When rewards become predictable, the habits system takes over to guide our actions. Just as factory workers doing routine tasks can be replaced by machines, the brain turns over predictable rewards to an “automatic pilot.” So, for instance, if you were to move from a cramped apartment to a lovely and spacious home, at first you would likely take pleasure in the size of the rooms, the beautiful floors, and the extra privacy. Over time, however, you’d become habituated to your living quarters. You would pay less attention to the things that attracted you to it in the first place and take less pleasure in them. That’s when you think about taking out a home equity loan, redoing the kitchen, and buying a new rug.

Given the pervasive advertising culture that urges us to keep on spending, is there any hope for getting us off this treadmill of desire? One can imagine a number of different cognitive strategies that may help, but one approach is to pay attention to the present moment and simply notice the things we already have—so many of which are good. This is a form of mindfulness. It can also be a key element in a vision to make our economic system more sustainable.

In her 2010 book, *Plenitude*, Juliet Schor advocates a path in which people work shorter hours. As a result, they earn less and spend less, but have more free time to enjoy life. With less money, people spend their leisure time in a less resource-intensive and more leisurely way. “In general, doing things faster tends to use more resources,” Schor said. “To truly get to sustainability, we’re going to have to slow down.” Schor spoke of a conversation she’d had with the late Donella Meadows, lead author of the landmark 1972 book, *The Limits to Growth*, in which Meadows shared her sentiment when she noted that “the speed of human activity has gotten out of sync with the speed of ecosystems.”

The only problem with this vision is that going fast is exciting and slowing down

is boring—unless you're mindful about it. Mindfulness generates novelty to excite the dopamine neurons not by covering a lot of ground fast, but by delving deeper into familiar turf. Unless we can learn to be mindful, we'll be at the mercy of advertisers who crank up the consumer treadmill to run faster and faster.

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Mindfulness is a practice with roots in Buddhism and other contemplative traditions, as well as in Western psychology going back to William James. It is the

cultivation of attention.

When you pay close attention, you awaken from the habit system's automatic pilot. Take a look around you. How many things do you see that would have amazed King Louis XIV of France? You are rich already.

Mindfulness is often associated with meditation, because meditation quiets the inner dialogue that takes one out of the present moment into ruminations about the past or



anxieties about the future. When people emerge from formal sitting meditation, they often report an inner stillness and a heightened awareness to external sights and sounds. One's sense of distaste or aversion to the present moment drops away. Yoga, too, teaches mindfulness through the practice of attention toward one's posture and movements.

But one can be mindful without meditating. Consider the words of pioneering ecologist Rachel Carson in her 1965 book, published posthumously, *The Sense of Wonder*:

*Exploring nature with your child is largely a matter of becoming receptive to what lies all around you. It is learning again to use your eyes, ears, nostrils, and finger tips, opening up the disused channels of sensory impression. For most of us, knowledge of our world comes largely through sight, yet we look about with such unseeing eyes that we are partially blind. One way to open your eyes to unnoticed beauty is to ask yourself, "What if I had never seen*



*this before? What if I knew I would never see it again?”*

This exquisite way of sensing the world is what mindfulness is about, and what we need to cultivate in young people to keep them off the consumer treadmill.

Ellen Langer is a Harvard psychologist with an office in the school’s psychology building, which happens to be named William James Hall. Langer’s first academic paper on mindfulness, published in 1978, approached it from the Western academic tradition. Langer said that most people don’t know the right way to pay attention—they confuse it with staring.

At a talk at MIT’s Media Lab, she asked those of us present to hold out a finger and pay attention to it. “Is this boring or what?” Langer quipped.

“Now mindfully attend to your finger, and that means notice different things about it,” she said. “You should feel the difference. Attending mindfully is easy.”

If mindfulness produces a sense of freshness and novelty, why is it so hard to pay attention? Langer said she’s asked students and teachers what it meant to pay attention. “They all say, ‘hold the image still as if you’re looking through a camera,’” Langer said, adding, “It’s the wrong instruction.”

Staring leads to boredom. Paying mindful attention means looking at the same old thing in new ways—examining overlooked details or glancing at it from a different angle. “Mindfulness is energy begetting, not consuming,” Langer said. “It’s the way you are when you’re at leisure, when you’re traveling.”

It is also the artist’s way of seeing. In her 1979 book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, art teacher Betty Edwards provides an exercise in which students are

asked to copy an upside-down portrait of the composer Igor Stravinsky. It's easier to make accurate copies from upside-down originals because when viewing an image upside-down, we observe the lines and shadows as they actually are. When viewed from a familiar vantage point, in contrast, our habitual expectation of what something should look like influences how we portray it. We might, for instance, draw a swimming pool as a rectangle, failing to notice that its far end appears narrower to the eye due to perspective.

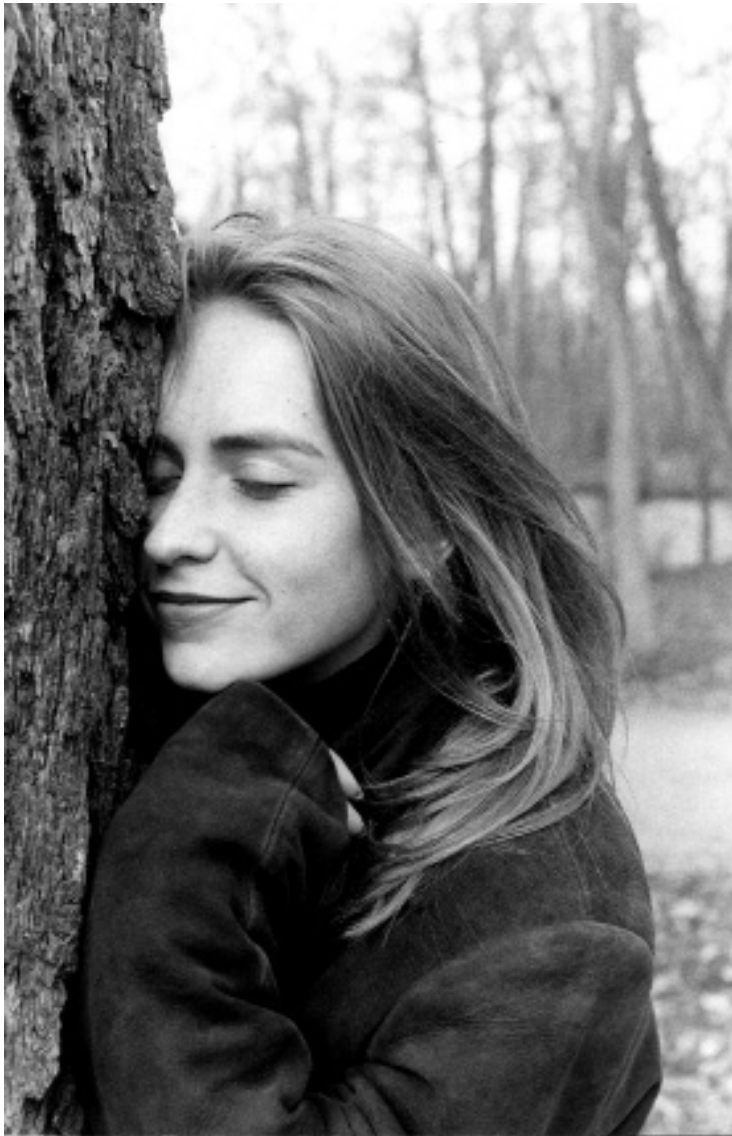
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A theory is emerging of how mindfulness gets done in the brain, down to the microcircuit level. The psychiatrist Daniel Siegel lays it out in his 2007 book *The Mindful Brain*. Siegel's ideas rely on the work of cognitive scientists like Stephen Grossberg of Boston University, whose model drills down to the way individual neurons in the cerebral cortex are organized into horizontal layers stacked in



columns. Briefly summarized, our perceptions are the outcome of a cooperative dance between lower layers that push up what our senses take in and higher layers that push down signals that modulate them. “The top-down signals are basically learned expectations,” Grossberg told me.

Expectations are a stabilizer. Without them, we’d feel discombobulated all the time as we try to make sense of the kaleidoscope of sights and sounds assaulting our senses. According to Grossberg, expectations shape and modify perception. We see what we are in the habit of seeing, unless the mismatch between our expectations and reality is very significant.



The level of mismatch we tolerate is controlled by the neurochemical acetylcholine. As we pay attention with greater vigilance, we notice more mismatches between expectations and reality. Mismatches mean we’re experiencing something novel. Because our habit system’s automatic pilot can’t handle the unexpected, mismatches get kicked up to consciousness. As they’re novel and unexpected, these mismatches likely get the dopamine neurons in the reward system going. Life

becomes more vivid and engaging.

This model is in line with the work of University of Michigan psychologists Rachel and Stephen Kaplan, who have studied the restorative effects of being in nature. They theorize that because of its inherent variety and novelty, nature grabs our attention and promotes the bottom-up flow of sensations. This is what Rachel Carson was referring to when she wrote of “opening up the disused channels of sensory impression.”

Daniel Siegel, who is co-director of the Mindful Awareness Research Center at UCLA, has connected these ideas about bottom-up and top-down flows to mindfulness. When I interviewed him, I asked how people variously perceive a rose. “Depending on the relative dominance of each flow,” he responded, “you can literally not bother to even experience an awareness of the scent and just think ‘Rose. Who cares? I’m late for work,’ or you can mindfully let the top-down not imprison you and spend even just five seconds with as pure a connection with the scent and sights of the rose or the thing that’s in front of you as possible.”

Siegel thinks that mindfulness can be an antidote to consumerism: “It’s going to take a huge paradigm shift, and maybe mindfulness is the key, to let people lower their materialistic treadmill tendencies, to awaken their minds to simple pleasures and meaningful connections in life and then to refocus their energies in ways that are truly meaningful—helping other people, building communities, finding a way to preserve the environment.”

\* \* \*

Once you learn it, mindfulness can be fun, even enthralling. It can restore a sense of freshness to the things you have, so that you feel fewer cravings to replace

them with brand new models. But is there really evidence that it results in less consumption?

Kirk Warren Brown is a psychologist at Virginia Commonwealth University in Richmond, Virginia, who studies mindfulness. He is the co-creator of the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale, which measures how predisposed a person is to be mindful. One's score is based on answers to a series of questions such as, "I find myself listening to someone with one ear, doing something else at the same time." Brown and his colleagues have found mindfulness to be more prevalent among people who adopt a lifestyle of voluntary simplicity, choosing not to maximize earnings but to focus instead on simple pleasures. Brown found these simplifiers to be just as happy as their more materialistic peers, matched by age and zip code. More recently, Brown studied whether a four-week mindfulness training program lessened financial desire—the wish to “keep up with the Joneses.” He found that to the extent participants learned to more mindful, they were happier and felt less



financial desire. The results seem promising. Some people can shift onto a path of mindfulness, simplicity, and reduced materialism that actually increases their happiness.

Brown defines mindfulness more broadly than simple awareness of one's immediate environment. "Someone can be very mindful of their thinking," Brown told me. "It's like there is this observer who is watching the show as well as part of the action." Being mindful of your purchasing habits, for instance, is a crucial step in making them more ecologically sustainable. But first, one must enjoy simplicity, because without that, one won't embrace it voluntarily.

Juliet Schor advocates a more leisurely consumer society than the one we have now, but not an impoverished society. Nor does Schor advocate anti-growth legislation that would mire the economy in recession. In fact, she says her program is one of cultural change that could be led by young people insisting on the freedom to limit the length of their own workday and to consume responsibly. American consumer trends, she observes, are models emulated throughout the globe. "In south India, where my husband is from," she said, "the middle classes there are mad for organic vegetables."

Mindfulness can play an essential supporting role in a move toward a slower paced and more sustainable society. The question is, can we get people to adopt it? Some, like Rachel Carson, have a natural affinity toward a contemplative outlook. But others may have a different disposition, and gadgets like the iPhone and Xbox may well be training young people to have shorter attention spans.

Still, all it takes to get a taste of mindfulness is twenty minutes of meditation—best done initially with others who can provide training and guidance. That's quicker than some sitcoms, and a lot quicker than trying to understand the science

behind climate change. Scientific research on mindfulness is just getting rolling, so further research may uncover easier ways of attaining a mindful state—just the thing for people who can't sit still for twenty minutes.

Perhaps we can think of technological change more broadly—not just more efficient wind farms but also cognitive methods that help us achieve happiness while relying on fewer material resources. Americans consume far above the level needed for physical survival. Much of that extra consumption is driven by cravings for rewards that are essentially psychological. There is fear too, among our political leaders, that they will lose office if the economy doesn't grow as fast as possible. It would aid the environment if these cravings and fears could be alleviated through psychological rather than industrial means.

With mindfulness, we can be satisfied with what we already have, or even a bit



less. When we frame the issue properly—do we want more possessions or more happiness—new solutions to the climate challenge become possible.

\* \* \*

### **What if climate change happened to you?**

One way to become mindful of a place or thing you take for granted is to follow Rachel Carson’s suggestion and ask yourself, “What if I knew I would never see it again?”

Given climate change, there may well be places you take for granted that will truly disappear in the future. They could be closer to home than you imagine. Climate change will make certain locations hotter and drier, and by melting polar ice caps, other places more vulnerable to flooding. If you live in a coastal region or in a



zone vulnerable to wildfires, someday your home may be threatened.

To bring this message “home,” imagine that because of an impending hurricane, flood, or wildfire, you have 15 minutes to evacuate your house. Tomorrow, it may be gone.

Pick one room in your home and try to notice everything, so the memory of it will be with you always. Notice decorative flourishes on the ceiling and window frames. Dust, cracks and stains are just more interesting details to note. Take it all in with nonjudgmental, loving attention.

What do you see that you haven’t noticed for a long time? Do you see anything that you never noticed before? Could you be happy even if these things truly disappeared? Consider the possibility that you could.

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Rick Heller is the creator of the Seeing the Roses project (<http://seeingtheroses.org>), which promotes mindfulness as a way of addressing climate change. He is the editor of the online magazine, The New Humanism, a publication of the Humanist Chaplaincy at Harvard University, and a facilitator of the Humanist Contemplative Group in Cambridge, Massachusetts. His writing has appeared in Free Inquiry, UUWorld, Buddhadharma, The Boston Globe and Lowell Sun.



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# *Words of Wisdom*

*A religion old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later, such a religion will emerge.*

Dr. Carl Sagan

*The ultimate value of life depends upon awareness and the power of contemplation rather than upon mere survival.*

Aristotle

*Stress is basically a disconnection from the earth, a forgetting of the breath.  
Stress is an ignorant state. It believes that everything is an emergency.  
Nothing is that important. Just lie down.*

Natalie Goldberg

*To become different from what we are, we must have some awareness of what we are.*

Eric Hoffer

*Let us not look back in anger or forward in fear, but around in awareness.*

James Thurber

*At times of great stress it is especially necessary to achieve  
a complete freeing of the muscles.*

Konstantin Stanislavsky

*You are the embodiment of the information you choose to accept and act upon. To change your circumstances you need to change your thinking and subsequent actions.*

Adlin Sinclair

*The life of inner peace, being harmonious and without stress,  
is the easiest type of existence.*

Norman Vincent Peale

*Health is the greatest gift, contentment the greatest wealth,  
faithfulness the best relationship.*

The Buddha

*Every accomplishment starts with the decision to try.*

Anonymous

*The only thing that can save the world is the reclaiming of the awareness of the world.  
That's what poetry does.*

Allen Ginsberg

*The secret of contentment is knowing how to enjoy what you have,  
and to be able to lose all desire for things beyond your reach.*

Lyn Yutang



# ***Qigong and Stress Resistance***

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## ***Introduction***

I will start by exploring what stress is and the negative affects of stress. Then, I shall demonstrate why Qigong is such a powerful tool for overcoming the negative affects of stress and for increasing your resistance to stress, by referencing scientific studies, where possible.

You see, I don't believe that stress is bad or that you can get rid of stress. Stress can help you to focus, to exceed your own expectations – it can be a push to improve your life.

Stress is a sign of life and you can't get rid of it, but Qigong is a powerful tool that can help you to avoid being overwhelmed by it.

## ***The Problem***

There is no denying the fact that the world is experiencing a number of major challenges – economic, environmental and ecological.

The result is that an increasing number of us find ourselves having to manage elevated levels of stress on a daily basis. How many of us have been directly affected by the death of a friend or loved one, work overload, legal problems, relationship concerns, increased worries about job security, or being able to meet financial commitments and manage debt?



## **Has Stress Got You In Its Grip?**

I first became aware of the harmful effects of stress many years ago when I was training for my advanced diploma in counselling.

Stress is like a runaway train bearing down on you - if you can't step out of its way, the results can be devastating - not only to you and your health but to your family and friends as well.

George Chrousos, M.D., of the National Institute of Child Health and Development has studied stress and describes the problem this way:

“A threat to your life or safety that triggers a primal, physical response from the body, leaving you breathless, heart pounding and mind racing [sic].

From deep within your brain, a chemical signal speeds stress hormones through the blood stream, priming your body to be alert and escape from danger.

Concentration becomes more focused, reactions become faster and strength and agility increase.

When the stressful situation ends, hormonal signals switch off the stress response and your body returns to normal.”

You'll recognise this as the 'Fight or Flight' syndrome that our ancient ancestors used in potentially life threatening situations. When an ancestor heard the roar and the rushing of another animal through the bushes towards him, stress hormones filled his body and he was ready to fight to the death or do whatever was necessary to escape the threat on his life.

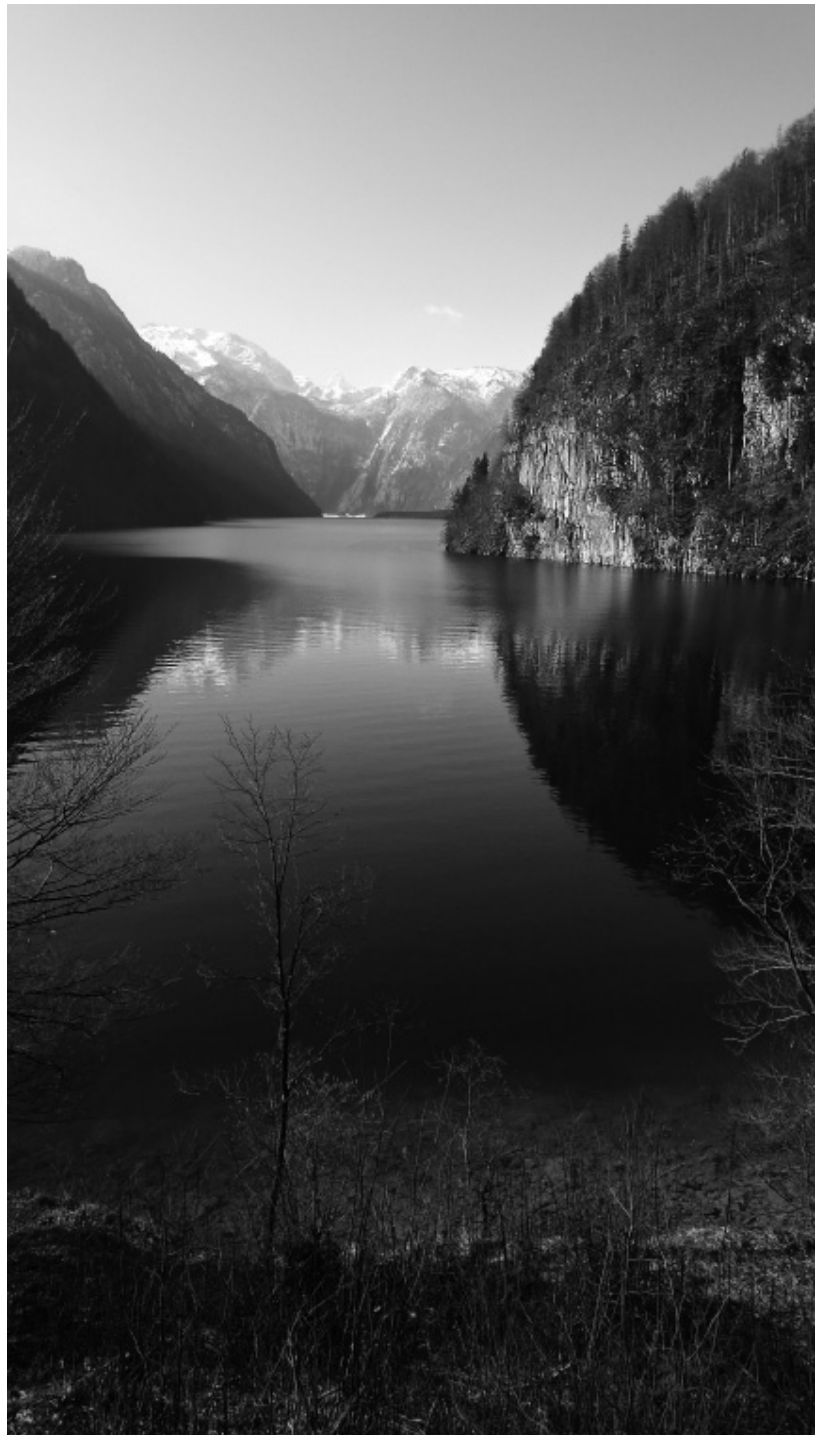
Compare this with a situation one might face today: your boss announces to you that your performance is not up to scratch, or that the company needs to streamline and you're in the firing line. What happens?

As the stress hormones fill your body, do you leap over your boss's desk and tear him limb from limb? Do you run out of the office, leap out of the first floor window and keep going until you reach safety? No, you stand there and take it and the powerfully toxic 'stress cocktail' doesn't get used up.

The problem we face today is that instead of only feeling stress when a real life or death situation is happening, we feel stress about events that are completely out of our control, about events that haven't even happened yet and even about events that may never come to pass.

Many of us constantly stress about financial problems, personal relationships, job performance and the future. These are not life or death events that need to be dealt with right now. But they still evoke the same stress response that George Chrousos mentions above.

The result is that the hormonal signals that turn off the stress response never arrive and the toxic stress cocktail stays in our bloodstream, tissues and organs.



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Here are some of the negative affects that this creates:

- Cortisol - one of the stress hormones – at continued high levels increases the appetite, which in turn leads to increased weight. People under stress commonly overeat, which can lead to many serious health problems. Also, because

cortisol suppresses your disease fighting white blood cells, this can 'leave the door open' to other afflictions.

- By restricting the release of stomach acid, stress hormones are responsible for many digestive problems.
- Stress has a negative affect on the sexual reproductive system - interfering with the production of the sex hormones testosterone, estrogen and progesterone.
- Continued exposure to stress weakens the immune system, which lowers your resistance to coughs, colds, infections and fatigue.

Stress related emotional problems are even worse. Chronic stress can result in melancholic depression – because the fight or flight mechanism doesn't switch off, the result is constant anxiety and over-reaction to stimulation. Hallmarks of this form of depression are anxiety, loss of appetite, loss of sex drive, rapid heartbeat, high blood pressure, and high cholesterol and triglyceride levels.

While anxiety is a normal reaction to stress, constant and repeated exposure can result in difficulty controlling it:

- 55 million US adults experience an anxiety disorder in a 12 months period. [1]
- 29 million have mood disorders.

- 10.7 million suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- In 2007, over 34,000 Americans committed suicide.

A recent study showed that chronic pain (often related to stress) is experienced by 100 million Americans, at a cost of around \$600 billion a year in medical treatments and lost productivity – according to a report from the Institute of Medicine (IOM June 2011).

\$300 billion or \$7,500 per employee is spent annually in the U.S. on stress-related compensation claims, reduced productivity, absenteeism, health insurance costs, direct medical expenses (nearly 50% higher for workers who report stress), and employee turnover. (Sources: Center for Disease Control and the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health.)

The European Agency for Safety and Health at Work reported that over half of the 550 million working days lost annually in the U.S. from absenteeism are stress related.

It is clear that stress can cause very serious problems. We need to take steps to increase our resistance to it or face the consequences.

## ***Qigong as an Antidote to Stress***

Qigong has been shown to be a powerful antidote to the effects of stress and can even help increase our resistance to stress. Most Qigong consists of gentle external movements, coordinated with the breath and performed in a meditative state of mind.

Qigong is the art of deliberately managing your vital energy. In a nutshell, vital energy (or Qi) is what keeps you alive and allows you to do everything you do. The practice is similar to Yoga (but less strenuous)



and Tai Chi (but easier to learn) and it requires virtually zero athleticism.

The foundational philosophy of Qigong is Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). TCM has been responsible for keeping one of the largest populations on the planet, with one of the longest series of continual records and a high level of culture – healthy, happy and well – for thousands of years.



**Qigong is simple, direct and effective.**

Here are just a few achievements of TCM that were far in advance of Western medicine:

- William Harvey is famous for having accurately described how blood circulates around the body. 2,500 years before William Harvey, the Inner Classic of Medicine (Zhou Dynasty 1027 – 256 BC) described how blood flow in the human body moved in a never-ending circle.
- Hua Tuo (208 – 118 BC) – a physician – was probably the first person known in the world to apply anaesthesia in surgery, about 2,000 years ahead of the West.
- The Chinese were the first to produce a governmental pharmacopeia, commissioned by the Tang government – in 657 – more than 800 years before the Florentine Nuovo Receptaris, which was the first Western pharmacopeia.
- Surgery reached an exceedingly high level during the Tang dynasty. “Magical Inherited Formulae” by Gong Qing Xuan, despite its supernatural name, provided many rational and effective methods for bleeding cessation and elimination of pain, treatment for shock, remedies for gangrene and various skin diseases, and detoxification. It is probably the world’s earliest book that specialises in surgery.
- In ophthalmology, it is awe-inspiring to learn that more than a 1,000 years

ago, the Chinese had already performed successful operations on the eyes to extract excessive fluid!

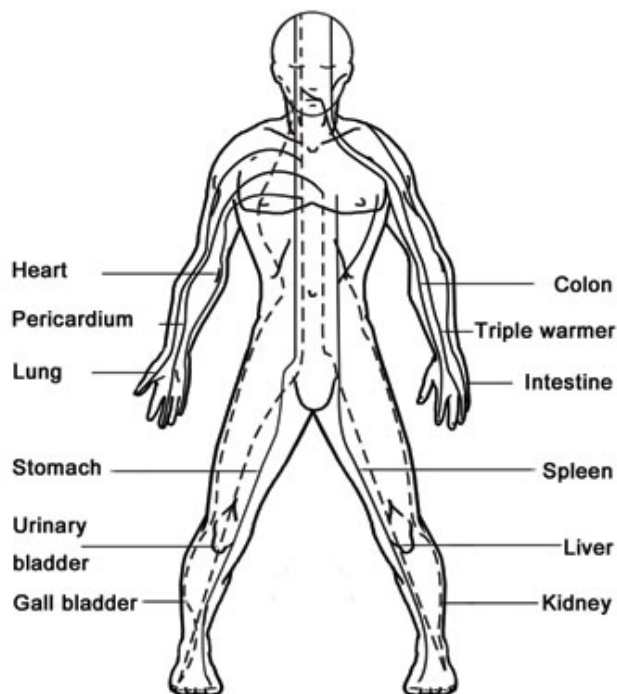
- The Tang government established the Imperial School of Medicine, which preceded the first medical school in the West (in Salerno, Italy) by 200 years.

- The Chinese have always considered preventative medicine as superior to healing. In the Nei Ching, it is written: “The inferior physician treats disease, the superior physician teaches the well to remain well”.

So just how does Qigong counteract the destructive effects of high cortisol levels in the blood stream?

### ***Perspectives on Self-Care***

Be careful with all self-help methods (including those presented in this Bulletin), which are no substitute for working with a licensed healthcare practitioner. People vary, and what works for someone else may not be a good fit for you. When you try something, start slowly and carefully, and stop immediately if it feels bad or makes things worse.



**Your vital energy (or Qi)  
flows through energy  
channels called meridians**

From the TCM viewpoint there is only 1 illness. Regardless of the physical, emotional or mental symptoms, it comes down to a lack of harmonious energy flow through the energy channels (meridians) of your body.

Because your physical, emotional and mental health is the result of harmonious energy flow, anything that affects this harmonious flow will impact your whole experience of life. This is why it is important to learn how to manage your own energy system.

Qigong is a simple, direct & effective way to manage your vital energy.

Kenneth M. Sancier, Ph.D. in a scientific report – “Medical Applications of Qigong” – published by Alternative Therapies in January 1996, concluded that medical applications of Qigong include:

- Decreased stroke and mortality rates - in a study of hypertensive patients, the mortality rate in the Qigong group was nearly half of the group who did not practice Qigong.
- Stabilised blood pressure - over a 20-year period, the blood pressure of the Qigong group stabilized, whereas that of the control group increased.
- Improvement in sex hormone levels - Sancier suggested that estrogen imbalances could “be reversed by Qigong exercise”.
- Increased blood flow to the brain – Sancier referenced two studies that showed



how Qigong increases blood flow to the brain. (Increased blood flow to the brain results in improved memory and a decrease in incidences of insomnia, numbness, vertigo, headaches, and high cholesterol.)

- Increased alpha brain waves - alpha brain waves are the key to stress relief, health, vitality and longevity.

“The main conclusion from many studies is that Qigong enables the body to heal itself” – Kenneth M. Sancier.

Additional studies on Qigong find that:

- “Qi-training improves anxiety and has a significant effect on the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis.” – Lee, M.S., et al. (2004), Effects of Qi-training on anxiety and plasma concentrations of cortisol, ACTH and aldosterone. *Stress and Health*, 20(5):243-248.
- “Qigong was shown to be a promising alternative intervention for elderly people with depression and with chronic physical illness to improve their biopsychosocial health and possibly reduce their suicide rate. The improvement from Qigong practice included feeling more relaxed, more comfortable, better sleep and being more optimistic. All of these reported improvements in psychosocial functioning are indicative of less depressed mood and improved quality of life.” – Tsang, H.W.H. (2003), Qigong and suicide prevention. *The British Journal of Psychiatry*, 182: 266-267.

Almost everyone can learn Qigong exercises for maintaining health and self-healing. Qigong consists of three core skills. It is these skills that distinguish Qigong from gentle exercise:

- Entering a Qigong State of Mind - you learn how to attain a higher state of consciousness, demonstrated by being relaxed and focused. This skill alone allows you to relax physically, emotionally and mentally like never before.
- Energy Flow – more poetically known as Flowing Breeze, Swaying Willows.

This happens when you are totally relaxed and your energy (Qi) flow inside makes your body sway gently. For centuries this has been a closely guarded, jealously kept secret of an elite few. As a result it is very rare to find this skill taught in most Qigong today.

- Standing Meditation - many people in the West today mistakenly believe that the only way to meditate effectively is in the seated Lotus position. For beginners, the physical discomfort commonly experienced in this position makes it difficult to achieve mental stillness. Standing meditation allows you to access the benefits of meditation quickly and effectively.

Numerous studies provide scientific evidence that meditation dramatically lowers stress and stress-related physical and emotional problems:

- The National Institute of Health reports that regular meditation can reduce chronic pain, anxiety, high blood pressure, cholesterol, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress response and blood levels of stress hormones.
- Frank Treiber, Ph.D. of the Medical College of Georgia says that meditation



lowers blood pressure, even for healthy young people, creating a 12.5% lower risk of stroke or coronary mortality in adulthood.

- Researchers at the University of Maryland School of Medicine reported that meditation relieved stress, reduced rheumatoid arthritis symptoms, reduced cardiovascular risk factors, decreased psychological distress, and improved sleep patterns.
- Studies at University of Toronto, Oxford University and Cambridge University found that 66% of those recovering from depression, who also meditated, remained stable (without relapse) over a year.
- Dr Herbert Benson of Harvard Medical School found that meditation releases tension, creates the willpower and consciousness to be in control of one's life, and alleviates depression, loneliness, hopelessness and despair.
- Dr Adrian White of the University of Exeter reported that meditators showed increased activity in the frontal lobe of the brain, which is associated with lower anxiety and a more positive emotional state.

Meditation has a dramatic and positive effect on stress and the physical and emotional problems caused by stress, but - in my opinion - it's nowhere near as dramatic as Qigong.

In "Medical Applications of Qigong", Kenneth Sancier references two studies that show how alpha brain waves dominate beta waves and spread to the frontal areas of the brain during Qigong practice.

One study found differences between the practice of Zen and the practice of Qigong. Sancier writes: "According to Kawano and



**Qigong is performed in a meditative state of mind, so every time you practice Qigong you are practicing and getting the benefits of meditation.**

Wang, these differences in brain function suggest that Qigong is a semiconscious process that involves some awareness and activity, whereas Zen meditation is a neutral process that releases the meditator from all concerns. Perhaps because of this difference, Qigong is considered a healing art, whereas Zen is generally not.”

Every time you practice Qigong you are also practicing (and getting the benefits of) meditation, but as Sancier suggests, Qigong is so much more than meditation. This is one reason why long term Qigong practitioners are largely unaffected by stressful situations.

## Conclusion

Understand this: stress is a sign of life. While I don’t believe it is possible or healthy to live a stress-free life, it is possible to increase your resistance to stress.



Learning how to calm the mind is scientifically proven to help you reduce stress, anxiety and worry.

The world does not change when you learn Qigong – things will still happen to you that you’d rather didn’t – and sometimes people will still behave towards you in ways you don’t deserve.

No, the world doesn’t change after practicing Qigong, something even better happens – you

change for the better.

There is a science behind Qigong. Scientific laws govern whether you are healthy or ill, energized or tired, articulate or confused, happy or sad - and they are just as exact as those that govern our universe. Learn to use them and you will be happy, healthy, feel vitalized, find eloquence and perform better at everything you choose to focus on, just as certainly as the force of gravity holds you to the earth.

When I first encountered the research in this article about the effects of Qigong and meditation on stress and stress-induced physical and emotional problems, I knew it was important that I share the findings.

You see, most people will never know that they can learn how to be happy, healthy and full of vitality and that it is no more difficult than learning how to brush your teeth. Given the darkening world situation, we all need to become more resilient and stress-resistant; and learning how to apply Qigong to “stress-proof” your life can be enormously beneficial.

There is a saying that ‘into every life a little rain must fall’ – think of Qigong as your giant golfing umbrella!

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Marcus Santer is the author of ‘Shaolin Chi Kung – 18 Exercises To Help You Live A Longer, Healthier & Happier Life’, you can download the first 20 pages for free at: <http://shaolinchikungbook.com>

For free Qigong exercises, Qigong healing tools and over 180 posts covering all aspects of Qigong, please visit Marcus’s blog at: <http://Qigong15.com/blog/>

[1] These figures are calculated using percentages attained from the National Institute of Mental Health and applying them to the 307, 006, 550 population of the USA – source 2009 US Census Bureau.



# *The Real Life*

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Don't be greedy with the universe, she said to me.

But she didn't say it in the mean way.

She didn't say don't dream big, don't want things, don't think you deserve.

She meant: look at your life and trust it.

Notice how you have forever been given what you need.

Notice how, while you've been railing and ranting and wanting, enoughness has gathered around you like stones around a fire,

How, while you've been making lists of what should be wishing the set and costumes were different, there was a whole other play happening on another stage.

The real life.

Witnessed when you hand a dollar to the woman behind the register  
in the color of an orange  
in the magic laugh

Never calling, just crackling, speaking in tones —  
the real life

Cup your hands and ask for it.

Start looking.

Sweetness. Honey in a bowl. Nectar.

# *Skillful Means*

The [Skillful Means](#) wiki, sponsored by the Wellspring Institute, is designed to be a comprehensive resource for people interested in personal growth, overcoming inner obstacles, being helpful to others, and expanding consciousness. It includes instructions in everything from common psychological tools for dealing with negative self talk, to physical exercises for opening the body and clearing the mind, to meditation techniques for clarifying inner experience and connecting to deeper aspects of awareness, and much more. The following psychological practice helps one simulate the parts of the nervous system that create positive feelings and help reduce stress.

## ***Transforming Anxiety***

### **Purpose / Effects**

Anxiety may seem like a consequence of busy modern life, but it first evolved as a response to threats our ancestors experienced in the wild. If we examine the six stereotypical reactions we have to anxious situations, we can see their evolutionary origins and then transform these natural responses into productive ways of dealing with stressful circumstances. These six responses are fight, flight, freeze, appease, tend, and befriend. By mastering them, making them our tools, and using them to our advantage, we can conquer our anxiety.

### **Method**

#### **Summary**

Figure out your natural anxiety response and transform it into something positive.

#### **Long Version**

1. *Fight*: The fight response is fairly obvious; it's what gets us into scuffles. If

anxious situations make you feel aggressive and feisty, you may be able to channel your energy into vocalizing your complaints (speaking up for what's right); just saying no; negotiating boundaries, conditions, and ground rules to avoid altercation; and doing battle with the anxiety-provoking beliefs and worries inside yourself. The fighter has to engage the situation to overcome his or her anxiety.

2. *Flight*: Flight makes us want to run away from our problems. If anxious situations make you want to run in the opposite direction, you're a fleer. That doesn't make you a coward; you can and should leave situations if they're not working and can't be fixed; look elsewhere for better situations rather than suffering in the one you're in; step back and disengage, especially when a situation starts to look hopeless. The fleer can also completely abandon and run away from anxious thoughts inside him or herself.

3. *Freeze*: Freezing is stopping all movement (mental or physical) until a problem goes away. If anxious situations tend to paralyze you, you may do best by calling time-outs; observing negative situations quietly; buying yourself or others time by waiting; being patient and restrained and letting things come and change



naturally; and creating space for new, better possibilities. The freezer's patience and measured personality helps him or her to make it out of a stressful situation with minimal added stress.

4. *Appease*: The appease response makes us supplicate; when we bow to our "betters." If you tend to take the blame yourself when in an anxious situation, you're an appeaser. You may find your anxiety lessened when you take maximum personal responsibility without overdoing it; when you offer genuine apologies; when you makes agreements and promises toward the future and amends for the past; when you give gifts, and when you acknowledge the grievances and anxieties of others and work to solve them.

5. *Tend*: The tend response invites us to nurture in order to balance out our stress. If anxious situations make you want to curl up and be taken care of, you would do well to build up your personal resources for dealing with situations: taking meditative time for yourself, relaxing, and building alliances and to take care of yourself, making sure that you work on your own anxiety-inducing tendencies gently while allowing your kindness and caring for others work on their own anxious tendencies.

6. *Befriend*: Befriending is the tendency to defuse anxious



situations with levity and charm. If anxious situations make you want to crack jokes and find common ground with others, you're a befriender. The befriender can use his or her skills by making friends with his or her enemies (to a point, of course), recognizing and being kind to the inner goodness inside every anxiety-inducing person or thing, befriending him or herself (meaning being one's own best ally), and bringing a sense of humor to a difficult situation.

7. Keeping the right hemisphere of the brain busy helps to alleviate anxiety because it evolved to scan for threats, while the left hemisphere in part works to control negative emotion. By keeping the "worrier" half busy and letting the "emoter" do its business without interference, you can reduce anxious reactions. Some activities that are right-hemisphere intensive include visualization based meditation (try this [Earth Descent Meditation](#)), Chanting / Devotional Singing, and Sky Gazing.

### **History**

As far back as the ancient Greeks, people were dealing with anxiety openly. As a response to stress, anxiety is as old as we are, but we are only just now beginning to understand it. It is completely normal to experience anxiety from time to time; however, the anxiety disorders (generalized anxiety disorder, obsessive-compulsive disorder, panic disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, and social anxiety disorder) have become part of psychological discussion as ways to describe unusually high levels of anxiety.

### **Cautions**

If your anxiety problems are severe enough to keep you from living the life you wish to lead, consult with a trained psychologist about your options.

### **Notes**

Other helpful techniques for reducing anxiety can be found in the wiki pages on [Nutritional Intervention](#) and [Physical Exercise](#), as anxiety responds very well both to supplementation in the diet and exercise.

# *The One Deep Inside Your Chest*

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Step back and watch your body, being a body.  
Watch an arm move through space, watch an ankle turn.

Watch your body, as it likes things or doesn't,  
as it gets scrapes and bruises  
as the skin darkens and falls into folds.

Step back to the perimeter of the theater  
and watch your body on the stage.

Recede to that quiet knowing:  
For now, I am associated with this body –  
not inside it, or one with it –  
just associated, for a time.

Casing. Only casing.  
Be kind to the casing if you like – put oils  
on it and nourish it and move it to keep it stronger, for a time.  
Never become it. There, only suffering.

Can you feel the one deep inside your chest,  
who has existed forever?  
Who has made a thousand journeys?  
Who feels like a comet in the dark?  
The inner filament?

I know, no one ever told you.  
I know. It wasn't the name you learned to write at school,  
but that one is you.  
That one is the real you.

## *Fare Well*

*May you and all beings be happy, loving, and wise.*