



# The Wise Brain Bulletin

News and Tools for Happiness, Love, and Wisdom

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## ***Learning to Love Ourselves – Our Gift to the World***

© James Baraz and Shoshana Alexander

Excerpted from [\*Awakening Joy: Ten Steps To Happiness\*](#) by James Baraz and Shoshana Alexander. 2012. Reprinted with permission from Parallax Press.

When I was a child, a strange fantasy troubled me from time to time. I imagined myself before birth, along with countless souls on rows of shelves, waiting to be selected for life on Earth. A giant hand - of God or His right-hand assistant - was reaching out for the soul next to me but by mistake plucked me up instead. So I was the ultimate fraud, not meant to be here at all, making it only by accident. Each time this image arose, I was left haunted by the feeling that I would be found out and sent back.

As a teenager I had such a poor self-image that I actually winced when I looked in the mirror. Adults called me “cute,” which was the last thing I wanted to hear. My sister kindly tried to assure me that I’d be fine and well liked, but I wasn’t convinced. No matter how much positive feedback I received from others, fear of being exposed as “not good enough” remained a familiar companion into my early adulthood. I felt like a loser with no chance of

## 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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Rick Hanson, PhD, edits the Bulletin. Michelle Keane is its managing editor, and it's designed and laid out by Laurel Hanson.

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turning into the hip guy I dreamed of being. In short, I didn't like myself. If somebody had told me it was possible to truly love myself, I wouldn't have believed it.

In my experience of working with thousands of students and clients, rarely have I encountered those who easily love themselves. Most commonly I hear: "If only I were..." followed by some variation of "thinner, stronger, kinder, smarter, calmer, more successful." Our assessment of ourselves is usually in comparison to others or to some ideal or standard we've adopted. If we have curly hair, we want straight; blue eyes, we want brown. If we tend to be quiet, we wish we were the life of the party. If we have a short fuse, we're convinced we'd be lovable if only we were calm and patient. On top of assessing ourselves as falling short, we add yet another layer of suffering. We close our heart to ourselves. This is the predicament we find ourselves in: we resist accepting ourselves as we are, yet this is what we've got. We can't be somebody else, no matter how hard we try.

There's only one of you, and if you let yourself be the best one possible, you may also start to like what you see. In time you may even love yourself.

For many of us, the idea of loving ourselves may seem out of reach. But if you know what it is to love someone else, you have what it takes to love yourself. Think about what it's like to love someone. For instance, when I think of my son Adam my heart naturally begins to open. I become aware of the distinct combination of traits I sense as his essence – his insatiable curiosity about how the mind works, his playful spirit, the "edge" (as he calls it) that is a counterbalance to his tenderness, his charming personality, the genuine goodness that radiates from his heart. Even those quirky traits that sometimes drive me crazy can seem endearing when I hold them in the broader context of his goodness and potential. If I were to focus only on the negative, I would lose touch with all the amazingly good stuff. My love for him is there, no matter what. The secret is to offer this same kind of love to yourself – to love and accept the whole package.

The capacity to accept and love ourselves doesn't necessarily happen quickly or easily. Those negative voices from siblings, teachers, sixth grade bullies, and disenchanted lovers still play in our mind. No matter how much positive reflection we've had, our brains are "like Velcro for negative experiences," as Rick Hanson puts it. Even seemingly insignificant events can leave deep impressions that color our self-concept and our ability to embrace who we are.

Learning to love yourself is a process that evolves over time. As you stop focusing on what you don't appreciate and start seeing yourself as a unique, mysterious, changing being, you allow your best self to shine through. And the joy of that radiates out to the world.

## ***Through the Eyes of Love***

Isn't it curious that often others can find us lovable far more readily than we ourselves can? This understanding became a key for me to finally open the door to deeper self-love.



I was on a silent retreat focused specifically on the practice of lovingkindness or *metta*. We were in the early days of the course, sending metta to ourselves. Hour after hour I sat in the stillness of my room earnestly following the instructions. *May I be safe from harm. May I be happy. May I be healthy. May I have inner peace.* After three days of continued repetition, I acknowledged the fact that I was experiencing a kindly self-acceptance and friendly appreciation for myself...and nothing more. What I didn't know was that those days of mechanical repetition had led me to the doorway I was looking for - and it was right around the corner.

As I sat there, the fall sunlight making its way through the leaves into my room, I found myself musing on the fact that others can love us with far more warmth and tenderness than we can feel for ourselves. *If only we could see what others see*, I thought to myself, *it would be so much easier to love ourselves.* I decided to try an experiment: *What would I see if I looked at myself through someone else's eyes?*

*Who really loves me?* I asked myself. Immediately the image came to mind of a certain friend whose love for me was strong and never in doubt. I could see his smile of delight as he beheld me, and feel his open heart beam at me with affection. As I took in that love, I began to experience a buoyancy and uplifting in my own heart.

Continuing the experiment, I asked myself: *why does he feel that way about me? What exactly does he see?* I imagined being him, and looking at myself from his perspective. Without any effort, I became aware of the kindness that so wants to be there for others, the playful spirit that loves to sing and have fun, the good heart that enjoys seeing others shine, the years of earnest and sincere spiritual practice. Without any squirming or pretending, I took some time to drink myself in, to really “get” what my friend was seeing.

Intellectually I knew those things about myself; there was nothing surprising about the particulars. But as I saw myself through my friend's eyes, there were none of the “yes...buts” that I would typically throw at myself. All at once I got the essence of *who I am*. The unique expression of “Jamesness” became apparent to me in a way that it never had before. I wasn't just a collection of good qualities and “yes...buts”; the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. And I began to understand and see for myself that James, this person my

friend was looking at, was enough - more than enough - just as I was. It was a moment of genuine and deep self-love.

Staying in contact with the qualities I had seen through my friend's eyes, I let my consciousness slowly move back inside me. Now those hours of planting seeds of love were finally bearing fruit, and a sweet loving energy fueled the phrases of metta. I was sincerely sending myself kind thoughts of well-wishing. And at last feeling fully deserving, I could take them in.

Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, "A mind stretched by a new idea does not shrink back to its original dimensions." Something shifted that day which has remained ever since. I had been looking for love and fulfillment outside myself - loving others, looking for love from others. But I had now come to understand that it was not from "out there" that I would feel loved and fulfilled, but by loving myself.

When I do on-site *Awakening Joy* courses, I invite participants to do the same exercise that I did - seeing themselves through the eyes of someone who loves them and acknowledging





some of their own good qualities. Though this part of the process may be challenging for some people, the real stretch happens when I then ask them to turn to one of their neighbors and share aloud those good things they saw about themselves. At first there is a lot of discomfort. A lot of people squirm at the thought of saying something so positive about themselves to another. After a few minutes though, the room begins to light up with enthusiasm. Once they recognize their lovable qualities, they see they're not so bad after all. It's a joy for me to see how great people feel when they get that glimpse of really being lovable.

### ***Seeing What You Like - Exercises***

Bring someone to mind who genuinely loves you. Imagine that person here with you. Feel the special energy and love you share. Imagine for a moment that you can inhabit that person's reality, and look back at yourself through his or her eyes. What qualities do you see in yourself through those eyes? Maybe your kindness, your sincerity, your playfulness?



Take some time to fully take in the feeling of those qualities.

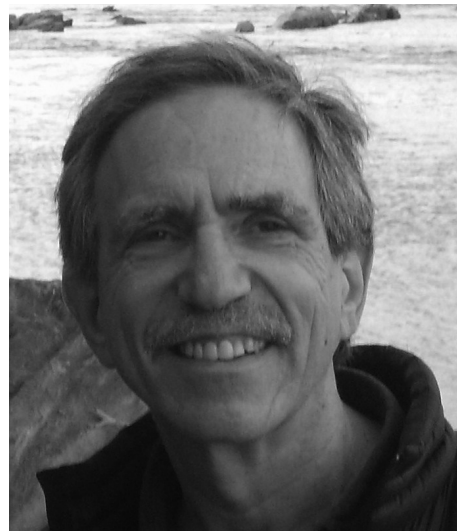
Now shift your perspective back into your own self, and from the inside feel those same qualities. Appreciate them, delight in them. Wish yourself well with thoughts like, “May I be happy. May I be peaceful. May I share my love well. May I be filled with joy.” Write down the qualities you saw and appreciated in yourself. Share what you saw with your Joy Buddy or with a trusted friend. For one week remind yourself each morning of the qualities you saw in yourself through loving eyes. Pay attention to how you feel when you express those qualities throughout your day.

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Spend a little time in front of a mirror, looking deeply at the image you see reflected there. Notice any judgments or habitual reactions that may arise. Instead of believing or feeding them, just acknowledge them and let them go. In a heart-felt way, say aloud or to yourself at least three specific good qualities you know you have. For instance you might say, “You really do care about others” or “You’re a terrific dancer.” Don’t try too hard. Even a glimpse of self-appreciation is a good start. As you acknowledge your positive attributes, notice the feelings that arise in your body and mind. Be sure to pause and take them in.

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# *13th Hour*

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I would rather not be pulled over  
driving from one world to another.

Waking to a million stars,  
all I see is a sticky web of inference.

Stop reading the horoscope~!

and put the scared toe  
in the icy water—where it is darkest.

Whatever the depth, that world below has more than this wooden one.

The embodied life of paradox,  
kept me unhappily tossing in bed.

I rest now. Dawn brings amnesia,  
but with a residue of wisdom, as the day turns, as another day turns.



# *Growing Good*

© Rick Hanson

Excerpt from *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence* by Rick Hanson, PhD. 2013. Reprinted with permission from Harmony Books.

Going through school, I was a year or two younger than the other kids in my grade, a shy, skinny, nerdy boy with glasses. Nothing awful happened to me, but it felt like I was watching everyone else through a wall of glass. An outsider, ignored, unwanted, put down. My troubles were small compared to those of many other people. But we all have natural needs to feel seen and valued, especially as children. When these needs aren't met, it's like living on a thin soup. You'll survive, but you won't feel fully nourished. For me, it felt like there was an empty place inside, a hole in my heart.

But while I was in college I stumbled on something that seemed remarkable then, and still seems remarkable to me now. Some small thing would be happening. It could be a few guys saying, "Come on, let's go get pizza," or a young woman smiling at me. Not a big deal. But I found that if I let the good fact become a good *experience*, not just an idea, and then stayed with it for at least a few breaths, not brushing it off or moving on fast to something else, it felt like something good was sinking into me, becoming a part of me. In effect, I was *taking in the good*—a dozen seconds at a time. It was quick, easy, and enjoyable. And I started feeling better.

In the beginning the hole in my heart seemed as big as an empty swimming pool. But taking in a few experiences each day of being included, appreciated, or cared about felt like tossing a few buckets of water into the pool. Day after day, bucket after bucket, month

after month, I was gradually filling that hole in my heart. This practice lifted my mood and made me feel increasingly at ease, cheerful, and confident. Many years later, after becoming a psychologist, I learned why doing this seemingly small practice had made such a large difference for me. I'd been weaving inner strengths into the fabric of my brain, my mind, and my life—which is what I mean by “hardwiring happiness.”

## ***Inner Strengths***

I've hiked a lot and have often had to depend on what was in my pack. *Inner strengths* are the supplies you've got in your pack as you make your way down the twisting and often hard road of life. They include a positive mood, common sense, integrity, inner peace, determination, and a warm heart. Researchers have identified other strengths as well, such as self-compassion, secure attachment, emotional intelligence, learned optimism, the relaxation response, self-esteem, distress tolerance, self-regulation, resilience, and executive functions. I'm using the word *strength* broadly to include positive feelings such as calm, contentment, and caring, as well as skills, useful perspectives and inclinations, and embodied



qualities such as vitality or relaxation. Unlike fleeting mental *states*, inner strengths are stable *traits*, an enduring source of well-being, wise and effective action, and contributions to others.

The idea of inner strengths might seem abstract at first. Let's bring it down to earth with some concrete examples. The alarm goes off and you'd rather snooze—so you find the will to get up. Let's say you have kids and they're squabbling and it's frustrating—so instead of yelling, you get in touch with that place inside that's firm but not angry. You're embarrassed about making a mistake at work—so you call up a sense of worth from past accomplishments. You get stressed racing around—so you find some welcome calm in several long exhalations. You feel sad about not having a partner—so you find some comfort in thinking about the friends you do have. Throughout your day, other inner strengths are operating automatically in the back of your mind, such as a sense of perspective, faith, or self-awareness.



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for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom**

The Institute is a 501c3 non-profit corporation, and it publishes the Wise Brain Bulletin. The Wellspring Institute gathers, organizes, and freely offers information and methods – supported by brain science and the contemplative disciplines – for greater happiness, love, effectiveness, and wisdom. For more information about the Institute, please go to <http://www.wisebrain.org/wellspring-institute>.

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A well-known idea in medicine and psychology is that how you feel and act—both over the course of your life and in specific relationships and situations—is determined by three factors: the *challenges* you face, the *vulnerabilities* these challenges grind on, and the *strengths* you have for meeting your challenges and protecting your vulnerabilities.

For example, the challenge of a critical boss would be intensified by a person's vulnerability to anxiety, but he or she could cope by calling on inner strengths of self-soothing and feeling respected by others.

We all have vulnerabilities. Personally, I wish it were not so easy for me to become worried and self-critical. And life has no end of challenges, from minor hassles like dropped cell phone calls to old age, disease, and death. You need strengths to deal with challenges and vulnerabilities, and as either or both of these grow, so must your strengths to match them. If you want to feel less stressed, anxious, frustrated, irritable, depressed, disappointed, lonely, guilty, hurt, or inadequate, having more inner strengths will help you.

Inner strengths are fundamental to a happy, productive, and loving life. For example, research on just one strength, positive emotions, shows that these reduce reactivity and stress, help heal psychological wounds, and improve resilience, well-being, and life satisfaction. Positive emotions encourage the pursuit of opportunities, create positive cycles, and promote success. They also strengthen your immune system, protect your heart, and foster a healthier and longer life.

On average, about a third of a person's strengths are innate, built into his or her genetically based temperament, talents, mood, and personality. The other two-thirds are developed over time. *You get them by growing them.* To me this is wonderful news, since it means that we can



develop the happiness and other inner strengths that foster fulfillment, love, effectiveness, wisdom, and inner peace. Finding out *how* to grow these strengths inside you could be the most important thing you ever learn. That's what this book is all about.

## ***In the Garden***

Imagine that your mind is like a garden. You could simply be with it, looking at its weeds and flowers without judging or changing anything. Second, you could pull weeds by decreasing what's negative in your mind. Third, you could grow flowers by increasing the positive in your mind. In essence, you can manage your mind in three primary ways: *let be, let go, let in*. This book is about the third one, the cultivation of inner strengths: growing flowers in the garden of the mind. To help you do this most effectively, I'd like to relate it to the other two ways to approach your mind.

## **What is Positive?**

By *positive* and *good*, I mean what leads to happiness and benefit for oneself and others. *Negative* and *bad* mean what leads to suffering and harm. I'm being pragmatic here, not moralistic or religious.

Positive experiences usually feel good. But some experiences that feel bad have good results, so I'll refer to them as positive. For example, the pain of a hand on a hot stove, the anxiety at not finding your child at a park, and the remorse that helps us take the high road make us feel bad now to help us feel better later.

Similarly, negative experiences usually feel bad. But some experiences that feel good have bad results, and I'll call these negative. The buzz from three beers or the vengeance in gossiping about someone who wronged you may feel momentarily pleasurable, but the costs outweigh the benefits. Experiences like these make us feel good now but worse later.

## **Being with Your Mind**

Letting your mind be, simply observing your experience, gives you relief and perspective, like stepping out of a movie screen and watching from twenty rows back. Letting the



stream of consciousness run on its own helps you stop chasing what's pleasant and struggling with what's unpleasant. You can explore your experience with interest and (hopefully) kindness toward yourself, and perhaps connect with softer, more vulnerable, and possibly younger layers in your mind. In the light of an accepting, nonreactive awareness, your negative thoughts and feelings can sometimes melt away like morning mists on a sunny day.

## **Working with Your Mind**

But just being with your mind is not enough. You also need to *work with* it, making wise efforts, pulling weeds and growing flowers. Merely witnessing stress, worries, irritability, or a blue mood will not necessarily uproot any of these. As we'll see in the next chapter, the brain evolved to learn all too well from negative experiences, and it stores them in long-lasting neural structures. Nor does being with your mind by itself grow gratitude, enthusiasm, honesty, creativity, or many other inner strengths.



These mental qualities are based on underlying neural structures that don't spring into being on their own. Further, to be with your mind fully, you've got to work with it to grow inner strengths such as calm and insight that enable you to feel all your feelings and face your inner shadows even when it's hard. Otherwise, opening to your experience can feel like opening a trapdoor to Hell.

## **Staying Mindful**

Whether you are letting be, letting go, or letting in, be *mindful*, which simply means staying present moment by moment. Mindfulness itself only witnesses, but alongside that witnessing could be active, goal-directed efforts to nudge your mind one way or another. Working with your mind is not at odds with mindfulness. In fact, you need to work with your mind to build up the inner strength of mindfulness.

Be mindful of both your outer world and your inner one, both the facts around you and how you feel about them. Mindfulness is not just *self*-awareness. While rock climbing, I've been extremely mindful of my partner belaying me and looking out for me far below!

## **A Natural Sequence**

When something difficult or uncomfortable happens—when a storm comes to your garden—the three ways to engage your mind give you a very useful, step-by-step sequence. First, be with your experience. Observe it and accept it for what it is even if it's painful. Second, when it feels right—which could be a matter of seconds with a familiar worry or a matter of months or years with the loss of a loved one—begin letting go of whatever is negative. For example, relax your body to reduce tension. Third, again when it feels right, after you've released some or all of what was negative, replace it with something positive. For instance, you could remember what it's like to be with someone who appreciates you, and then stay with this experience for ten or twenty seconds. Besides feeling good in the moment, this third step will have lasting benefits, for when you take in positive experiences, you are not only growing flowers in your mind. You are growing new neural circuits in your *brain*. You are hardwiring happiness.

## Experience-Dependent Neuroplasticity

The brain is the organ that *learns*, so it is designed to be changed by your experiences. It still amazes me but it's true: Whatever we repeatedly sense and feel and want and think is slowly but surely sculpting neural structure. As you read this, in the five cups of tofu-like tissue inside your head, nested amid a trillion support cells, 80 to 100 billion neurons are signaling one another in a network with about half a quadrillion connections, called synapses. All this incredibly fast, complex, and dynamic neural activity is continually changing your brain. Active synapses become more sensitive, new synapses start growing within minutes, busy regions get more blood since they need more oxygen and glucose to do their work, and genes inside neurons turn on or off. Meanwhile, less active connections wither away in a process sometimes called neural Darwinism: the survival of the busiest.

All mental activity—sights and sounds, thoughts and feelings, conscious and unconscious processes—is based on underlying neural activity. Much mental and therefore neural





activity flows through the brain like ripples on a river, with no lasting effects on its channel. But intense, prolonged, or repeated mental/ neural activity—especially if it is conscious—will leave an enduring imprint in neural structure, like a surging current reshaping a riverbed. As they say in neuroscience: *Neurons that fire together wire together*. Mental states become neural traits. Day after day, your mind is building your brain.

This is what scientists call *experience-dependent neuroplasticity*, which is a hot area of research these days. For example, London taxi drivers memorizing the city's spaghetti snarl of streets have thickened neural layers in their *hippocampus*, the region that helps make visual-spatial memories; as if they were building a muscle, these drivers worked a part of their brain and grew new tissue there. Moving from the cab to the cushion, mindfulness meditators have increased gray matter—which means a thicker *cortex*—in three key regions: *prefrontal* areas behind the forehead that control attention; the *insula*, which we use for tuning into ourselves and others; and the hippocampus. Your experiences don't just grow new synapses, remarkable as that is by itself, but also somehow reach down into your genes—into little strips of atoms in the twisted molecules of DNA inside the nuclei of neurons—and change how they operate. For instance, if you routinely practice relaxation,



this will increase the activity of genes that calm down stress reactions, making you more resilient.

## Changing the Brain for the Better

If you step back from the details of these studies, one simple truth stands out: Your experiences *matter*. Not just for how they feel in the moment but for the lasting traces they leave in your brain. Your experiences of happiness, worry, love, and anxiety can make real changes in your neural networks. The structurebuilding processes of the nervous system are turbocharged by conscious experience, and especially by what's in the foreground of your awareness. Your attention is like a combination spotlight and vacuum cleaner: It highlights what it lands on and then sucks it into your brain—for better or worse.

There's a traditional saying that the mind takes its shape from what it rests upon. Based on what we've learned about experience-dependent neuroplasticity, a modern version would be to say that *the brain takes its shape* from what the mind rests upon. If you keep resting





your mind on self-criticism, worries, grumbling about others, hurts, and stress, then your brain will be shaped into greater reactivity, vulnerability to anxiety and depressed mood, a narrow focus on threats and losses, and inclinations toward anger, sadness, and guilt. On the other hand, if you keep resting your mind on good events and conditions (someone was nice to you, there's a roof over your head), pleasant feelings, the things you do get done, physical pleasures, and your good intentions and qualities, then over time your brain will take a different shape, one with strength and resilience hardwired into it, as well as a realistically optimistic outlook, a positive mood, and a sense of worth. Looking back over the past week or so, where has your mind been mainly resting?

### **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.

In effect, what you pay attention to—what you rest your mind on—is the primary shaper of your brain. While some things naturally grab a person's attention—such as a problem at work, a physical pain, or a serious worry—on the whole you have a lot of influence over where your mind rests. This means that you can deliberately prolong and even create the experiences that will shape your brain for the better.

I'll show you how to do this in detail, beginning in chapter 4. Meanwhile, feel free to start taking in the good right now. This practice, applied to a positive experience, boils down to just four words: *have it, enjoy it*. And see for yourself what happens when you do.

## **The Experiences That Serve You Most**

Contemplating your mental garden these days, which flowers would be good to grow? Certain kinds of experiences will help you more than others will.

Negative experiences might have value for a person. For instance, working the graveyard shift in a bottling plant one summer while in college toughened me up. But negative

experiences have inherent negative side effects, such as psychological discomfort or the health consequences of stress. They can also create or worsen conflicts with others. When my wife and I were tired and frazzled raising two young children, we snapped at each other more often. The costs of negative experiences routinely outweigh their benefits, and often there's no benefit at all, just pain with no gain. Since neurons that fire together wire together, staying with a negative experience past the point that's useful is like running laps in Hell: You dig the track a little deeper in your brain each time you go around it.

On the other hand, positive experiences always have gain and rarely have pain. They usually feel good in the moment. Additionally, the most direct way to grow inner strengths such as determination, a sense of perspective, positive emotions, and compassion is to have experiences of them in the first place. If you want to develop more gratitude, keep resting your mind on feeling thankful. If you want to feel more loved, look for and stay with experiences in which you feel included, seen, appreciated, liked, or cherished. The answer to the question of *how* to grow good things inside your mind is this: *Take in experiences of them.* This will weave them into your brain, building up their neural circuits, so you can take them with you wherever you go.



Besides growing specific inner strengths for yourself, taking in the good has built-in, general benefits such as being active rather than passive, treating yourself as if you matter, and strengthening your attention. Additionally, as we'll see in chapter 3, over time you can gradually sensitize your brain to positive experiences so they become inner strengths more quickly and easily.

## ***Self-Directed Neuroplasticity***

A neurologist friend of mine once described the brain as “three pounds of tapioca pudding.” It looks like a gooey, unimpressive blob. But it’s the master organ of the body and the primary internal source of your well-being, everyday effectiveness, psychological healing, personal growth, creativity, and success. Whether you feel angry or at ease, frustrated or fulfilled, lonely or loved depends on your neural networks. Further, how brains interact is the basis of fulfilling relationships, successful organizations, thriving nations, and ultimately, whether we live in a peaceful and sustainably prosperous world.



The science of experience-dependent neuroplasticity shows that each person has the power to change his or her brain for the better—what Jeffrey Schwartz has called *self-directed* neuroplasticity. If you don't make use of this power yourself, other forces will shape your brain for you, including pressures at work and home, technology and media, pushy people, the lingering effects of painful past experiences, and as we'll see in the next chapter, Mother Nature herself.

On the other hand, in quick, easy, and enjoyable ways right in the flow of your day, you can use the power of self-directed neuroplasticity to build up a *lasting* sense of ease, confidence, self-acceptance, kindness, feeling loved, contentment, and inner peace. In essence what you'll do with the practices in this book is simple: turn everyday good experiences into good neural structure. Putting it more technically: You will *activate* mental states and then *install* them as neural traits. When you need them, you'll be able to draw on these neural traits, which are your inner strengths, the good growing in your mind.

You'll be using your mind to change your brain to change your mind for the better. Bit by bit, synapse by synapse, you really can build happiness into your brain.

And by doing this, you'll be overcoming its negativity bias: The brain is good at learning from bad experiences, but bad at learning from good ones. As you'll see in the next chapter, if the mind is like a garden, the “soil” of your brain is more fertile for weeds than for flowers. So it's really important to plant the seeds of inner strengths by repeatedly taking in the good.

## ***Taking It In***

- A person's inner strengths include peacefulness, contentment, and love, as well as resilience, confidence, determination, and insight. These strengths help you cope with the hard things in life, recover from stress, heal old pain, maintain your well-being, get things done at home and work, and be patient and caring toward others.

- Most of your inner strengths are developed over time. This book is about growing inner

strengths through positive experiences, which is hardwiring happiness.

- Simply observing your mind is extremely useful, but you also need to decrease what's negative and increase what's positive. My focus is on increasing the positive: growing flowers in the garden of the mind. Which means changing the structures of your brain.
- All mental activity—sights and sounds, joys and sorrows— is based on underlying neural activity. Repeated mental/neural activity leaves lasting changes in neural structure: what's called experience-dependent neuroplasticity. This means you can use your mind to change your brain to change your mind for the better.
- The best way to develop greater happiness and other inner strengths is to have experiences of them, and then help these good mental states become good neural traits. This is taking in the good: activating a positive experience and installing it in your brain.

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Rick Hanson, Ph.D., is a neuropsychologist and New York Times best-selling author. His books include *Hardwiring Happiness: The New Brain Science of Contentment, Calm, and Confidence* (in 11 languages), *Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love, and Wisdom* (in 25 languages), *Just One Thing: Developing a Buddha Brain One Simple Practice at a Time* (in 12 languages), and *Mother Nurture: A Mother's Guide to Health in Body, Mind, and Intimate Relationships*. Founder of the Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and



Contemplative Wisdom and on the Advisory Board of the Greater Good Science Center at UC Berkeley, he's been an invited speaker at Oxford, Stanford, and Harvard, and taught in meditation centers worldwide. A *summa cum laude* graduate of UCLA, his work has been featured on the BBC, NPR, CBC, FoxBusiness, *Consumer Reports Health*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and *O Magazine* and he has several audio programs with Sounds True. His weekly e-newsletter – *Just One Thing* – has over 100,000 subscribers, and also appears on *Huffington Post*, *Psychology Today*, and other major websites.



# *Skillful Means*

[Your Skillful Means](#), 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.

## **Gratitude practice; being thankful**

### **Purpose / Effects**

Gratitude practice is simply being thankful for the good in our lives. By focusing us on positive rather than negative thoughts, it helps us to see the cup of life as half-full rather than as half-empty. It reminds us not to be greedy and to find satisfaction in what we have, though we may strive for more. Gratitude requires no sacrifice but provides great rewards in compassion, happiness, and mindfulness.

### **Method**

#### **Summary**

Every day, acknowledge something for which you are grateful.

#### **Long Version**

- Keep a journal you can use for your gratitude practice. This journal can be separate from the one you use for [Emotional Journaling](#), or you can use the same one if you wish. Every day, write down five things for which you are grateful, no matter how simple or humble. Be honestly appreciative, and don't patronize yourself with gratitude for, say, "having food unlike all those starving kids in China."
- If you don't wish to journal, at the end of every day, say your five things to yourself before going to bed.

- See the giver behind the gift. When something nice happens, think about the person who made this pleasant experience happen. Did your partner bring you a cup of tea without asking? Did a friend call just to see how you were doing? Did the checkout girl at the grocery store notice a rotten piece of fruit in your bag and tell you so you could exchange it? It doesn't matter if the experience was small. Express your genuine gratitude to this person and remind yourself that people are often surprisingly, overwhelmingly kind. Say thank-you to everyone.
- If you are a religious person, use your gratitude as an opportunity for praise. Always begin your prayers with thanks to God for your blessings, rather than supplications for favor. Saying grace before a meal is a type of gratitude practice that many of us have experienced; it can even be done by the non-religious.
- Use the emotional strength that gratitude practice brings you as a tool. Recognizing the beauty of the world does not mean ignoring its flaws. Do your best every day to earn your blessings; [Community Service / Charity](#) is a great way to manifest your gratitude
- Do this even when you don't feel like it. When you're angry or sad, gratitude is even



more important than when you're happy. These emotions are valid, of course, but by reminding yourself of what there is to be thankful for, you can take off their destructive edge.

### **History**

Gratitude practice is part of many of the world's major faiths. The Psalms of the Hebrew Bible are full of thanks and praise to God for all his blessings. Christian worship centers on thanking Jesus for his sacrifice on behalf of the world. The prophet Muhammad, founder of Islam, said, "Gratitude for the abundance you have received is the best insurance that the abundance will continue." The Hindu ritual of puja expresses gratitude to its deities through offerings. And gratitude is an important part of Buddhist lovingkindness practice. The contemporary positive psychology movement recommends gratitude practice as one of the strongest tools for promoting a sense of general wellbeing in all.

### **Notes**

It's been shown in clinical studies that people who write down their gratitude for ten weeks had their levels of happiness raised 25% from the control group. It's that simple: being thankful makes us happy.

Paramahansa Nithyananda teaches about the importance of gratitude: <http://youtu.be/dbFmpUOOTds>. It's been shown in clinical studies that people who write down their gratitude for ten weeks had their levels of happiness raised 25% from the control group. It's that simple: being thankful makes us happy.

### **See Also**

[Community Service / Charity](#)

[Taking In the Good](#)

[Three Good Things Exercise \(a specific gratitude practice exercise\)](#)

### **External Links**

[Better Mood from Gratitude: proven through research](#)

[Research study covering gratitude practice](#)

## ***Fare Well***

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