The Wise Brain Bulletin

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Self as Ever Shifting Flow

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From *How to Wake Up: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide to Navigating Joy and Sorrow*.

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What we call "I" is just a swinging door which moves when we inhale and when we exhale.

Shunryu Suzuki

Impermanence is the first mark of experience common to all human beings. The second one is what Buddhists call *no-fixed-self.* Like uncertainty and unpredictability, no-fixed-self is a corollary of the universal law of impermanence. But unlike those two corollaries, no-fixed-self was a concept unique to the Buddha's teaching. He took the radical step of applying impermanence even to what we think of as our *self.* Twenty-five hundred years later, neuroscientists are coming to the same conclusion; they're finding multiple circuitry in the brain, but no fixed seat of the self. As Pema Chödrön noted in the quotation that begins the previous chapter, "nothing is static or fixed." That would include this notion of *self.*

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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This person I think of as a fixed entity, "Toni Bernhard," is, in reality, an ever-changing combination of physical traits, thoughts, emotions, and actions. Where, then, do I get the idea of "Toni Bernhard"? As a result of past and current conditions in my life, this combination of physical traits, thoughts, emotions, and actions tends to come together in repeating patterns. The mind then abstracts from these patterns and assumes they make up an intrinsic someone called "Toni Bernhard." The mind, in effect, creates a story, starring a character it calls (drum roll, please . . .) *Toni Bernhard!* And so, I take that to be *who I am*—an entity with fixed, unchanging characteristics.

Here's an example. When I was a teenager, I behaved in repeating patterns that society had identified as signs of depression. Quite understandably, this led my family to come up with this abstraction from my behavior: I was a depressed person. As a result, I took on that label and that identity: "Toni Bernhard, depressed person." I thought that was *who I was*, and that "depressed person" was a fixed aspect of my being. But those emotional and behavioral patterns changed as soon as I moved out of the house to go to college. That notion of an intrinsic, fixed self—depressed person—turned out to be an illusion. It was just a passing identity based on the repetition of emotional and behavioral patterns in my life at the time.

Many years later, my idea of who I was became "law professor." As I'd done with "depressed person," now "law professor" became how I identified myself. When I unexpectedly had to stop working due to illness, the identity of "law professor" followed me from the classroom to the bedroom. Although I was clearly unable to carry out the duties of my profession, I would lie in bed and anxiously think, "If I'm not a law professor, who am I?"

It took me several years to see that clinging to the identity "law professor" had become a source of deep sorrow and suffering for me. It was then that I realized that "law professor" was an abstract idea, based on repeating patterns in my experience at the time: going to the same place every day where people called me "Professor Bernhard"; repeatedly seeing that very label in writing—on the name plate next to my office door, on my faculty mailbox, on written materials.

"Law professor" turned out not to be a fixed self any more than "depressed person" had been. Both were stories in my mind— abstractions from my experience that I clung to as an intrinsic quality of *me*. And even though the identity "depressed person" was one I *didn't* like and the identity "law professor" was one I *did*, in both instances, when I let go of those identities, I felt a great sense of peace and liberation.

In the same way, the identity "Toni Bernhard" is a story. Of course, it's a necessary one at times! After all, I can't get a driver's license unless I'm willing to say "I am Toni Bernhard." And I'm using self-referential terms, such as "I" and "me," throughout this book in order to communicate effectively. But even so, I'm working to hold the identity "Toni Bernhard" lightly, without believing it implies a fixed, nonchanging essence.

The Many Ways We're Fixed in Identities

We humans are incredibly adept at identifying with our experiences and circumstances and then coming to assume they are part of who we are intrinsically. We can identify ourselves with a race, ethnic background, gender, and nationality. We can identify ourselves with a job title. We can identify with what we perceive to be our personality traits: smart, funny, trustworthy, stupid, judgmental, foolish. We can identify with our bodies: short, tall, fat, thin, handsome, unattractive, healthy, sick. We can identify with our religious affiliation or with our political leanings: "I *am* a liberal"; "I *am* a conservative."

Some of these identities are internalized during our formative years due to cultural influences or to how we were treated by others. As we repeatedly recall those influences and experiences, we come to believe that they represent real qualities of ourselves, and this can become a deep source of suffering. For example, if a parent repeatedly told us that we didn't try hard enough or that we were always in the way or that we couldn't do anything right, we're likely as adults to think of those characterizations as fixed qualities of ourselves—intrinsic to who we are. If this is the case for you, my heartfelt wish is that this chapter will help you see that you need not define yourself by any of these identities.

If you'd like to experiment with the ways in which you've created fixed identities, make a list of all the identities you've been using to define yourself. My list includes sick person, hard worker, devoted parent, worrier, perfectionist, author. When you're done with your

list, reflect separately on each of the identities you've written down. Is it a source of joy for you? Suffering? A mixture of the two? Does it carry a judgment, meaning do you think of the identity as "good" or as "bad"? For example, if you listed "overweight" or "easily frustrated," a negative judgment might have arisen along with your self-characterization. If you listed "highly motivated" or "generous," you may have noticed a positive judgment arise: "It's good to be highly motivated"; "I'm proud that I'm generous."

Now begin to examine the effects of becoming attached to these identities. When I do this, two insights stand out for me. First, I notice that the identities that I judge negatively are sources of suffering for me. One example: the identity "sick person." It's a source of suffering because the identity brings along with it stressful thoughts and emotions: "I shouldn't be sick"; "I've been cheated out of a dozen years of my life"; "What if I get worse and worse?"

However, if I look more deeply at the identity "sick person," I see that it has no intrinsic existence. There is this body and there is this mind; there are physical sensations and mental sensations. There's no reason to label either one as the fixed identity "sick." In fact, there's a lot this body can do that so-called "not sick" people can do: walk, talk, eat, pet the dog. And so I practice looking at the phrase "sick person" as an abstraction in my mind, with no intrinsic existence. When I do this, I feel a sense of relief and freedom. There's just this moment—here, now—containing whatever physical and mental sensations I'm experiencing.

The second insight that stands out for me is that the identities on my list—even those I judge as "good"—make me feel separate from others. And when I look closely, I see that this is also a source of suffering for me. This sense of separation occurs because identities are often formed by comparing ourselves to others. If I think of myself as highly motivated, I'm separating myself from those whom I perceive not to be. The same would occur if I think of myself as generous. I've put myself into an identity box, so to speak, and then feel

separated from those who I perceive don't fit in it. But aren't highly motivated people sometimes also not motivated? And aren't generous people sometimes also not so generous? I think so. Even identities we form around race, gender, religion, nationality, and political affiliation can make us feel separate from others.

I joke with my husband about a test I've devised for deciding if an identity is worth defining myself by. I ask: "Does the identity pass my hound-dog test?" I spend a lot of time with my hound dog Rusty, so I figure he knows the *real me*. Does he think of me as a Buddhist? No! An American? No! A published author? Certainly not! You get the idea. I hope you'll try this *no-fixed-identity exercise*.

One reason we seek the "real me" by holding on to these identities is that they provide us with a sense of security. But we know from the law of impermanence that there's not much security to be found in this life. And so I work on shedding the identities I've come to regard as "me" or "mine." Instead, I try to embrace the insecurity that comes from not being a fixed self at all.

Not Clinging to Identities Is Liberating

Thinking of myself as an ever-changing process rather than as a fixed person gives my life a feeling of fluidness and potential. In *Buddhism Without Beliefs*, Stephen Batchelor refers to himself as "an unfolding narrative." When I'm able to see that the words appearing to fix me in an unchanging identity are simply abstract concepts arising and passing in the mind, I'm able to stop clinging to the idea of a fixed self. Then I can let that narrative unfold, and possibilities open up that I may not have even imagined.

For example, it was only when I let go of the identity "law professor" that I was able to begin writing my first book. This was partly because when law professors engage in scholarly

writing, they don't talk about their personal lives. And so when I was stuck in the identity "law professor," it never occurred to me that I could write a book in which I could use my personal experience with chronic illness to illustrate the points I was making.

My favorite description of no-fixed-self comes from the eco-philosopher Joanna Macy: "I am a flow-through of matter, energy, and information." I like to consciously think of myself (or, my "self") as nothing more than a constellation of causes and conditions that have come together at this particular moment in time. Indeed, many scholars think that this was what the Buddha was referring to when he talked about *rebirth—rebirth* moment-to-moment into ever-shifting identities, distinct from but related to the identities of previous moments. When I'm able to recognize that clinging to an identity is an attempt to freeze in time what is, in reality, part of the uninterrupted flow of life, I feel light and free.

It's important to understand that thinking in terms of no-fixed-self is not a kind of reductionism; it is not an attempt to explain away the complexities of existence by simply saying nothing abides. The concept of no-fixed-self is a pointer that is intended to inspire us to investigate the nature of the human condition. Why do we suffer? What can be done to alleviate it? How does the idea of a fixed self contribute to suffering and unhappiness?

Perhaps you think of yourself as an angry or impatient or judgmental person. The lesson of no-fixed-self is that you need not feel stuck in any of these identities. They've arisen as a result of repeating patterns of thoughts, emotions, and actions in your life, and such pat-

terns can change. Using the practices in this book, you can begin to change the inclination to be angry or impatient or judgmental. Like all phenomena, these mental states are impermanent; they are not fixed characteristics.

Freedom comes from not clinging to any identity at all, whether we think of it as desirable or not. Not becoming attached to identities we perceive as undesirable—depressed person, for example— frees us to think of ourselves as multidimensional, as opposed to being limited to a few painful characteristics. And not becoming attached to identities we perceive as desirable—law professor, for example—frees us from the suffering that will arise when those identities yield, as they inevitably will, to the law of impermanence.

Far from being nihilistic, the truth of no-fixed-self opens our hearts and minds—our very lives—to possibilities we might not have imagined before!

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Toni Bernhard is the author of *How to Be Sick: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide for the Chronically Ill and their Caregivers*. *How to Be Sick* won the 2011 Gold Medal Nautilus Book Award in Self-Help/Psychology and was also named one of the best books of 2010 by *Spirituality and Practice*. Her new book, *How to Wake Up: A Buddhist-Inspired Guide to Navigating Joy and Sorrow*, was just released. Until forced to retire due to illness, Toni was a law professor at the University of California—Davis, serving six years as the dean of students. She has been a practicing Buddhist for over 20 years. Her blog, "Turning Straw Into Gold" is hosted on the website of *Psychology Today*. She can be found online at www.tonibernhard.com.

Things We Don't Know Yet

How to create a childhood worthy of the sacredness of the child

How to forgive ourselves, entirely

How to love without projection or dependence

How to honor the strength of love alongside the strength of might

How much we are held, blessed

What we would create, if we believed we could.

We're still young, still in an early era.

The status quo is just a middle chapter.

So have compassion for this fools' world of ours

and don't be afraid

to be the one

to help us turn the page.

The Fear Project

Life is tough. And a few years ago, I was having a particularly hard time. A five-year relationship had just ended. I was on a public-speaking tour (which was making me really nervous). Nothing felt free and clear. Everything was scary. It was in this dark place that I started reading Rick Hanson's book, *Buddha's Brain*. Reading Rick's clear words, all grounded in hard data, was like finally turning on a flashlight while crawling through a dark labyrinth. I was still lost, but now I at least had a chance of getting found (or perhaps better yet, enjoying a labyrinthine stroll). It was turning that flashlight on that eventually led me to writing my latest book, *The Fear Project*. The book is a personal, journalistic, and scientific dive into how we humans can better navigate the dark scary places in life. Fear is a tricky bugger, so when I started the book I knew I wanted to interview the most cutting edge scientists, meditation masters, athletes and artists to see how they deal with fear. Naturally, Rick Hanson was at the top of that list. Below is an excerpt from *The Fear Project* based on my interviews with Rick. I'm grateful to call him a friend now and grateful for the chance to share some of our conversation in the Wise Brain Bulletin.

Excerpt from *The Fear Project*. 2013.

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It's an overcast fall day when I meet with Rick Hanson in his Zen garden–like backyard, in the green, rolling hills north of San Francisco. Hanson pours me some tea and we admire the scenery: the tall swaying grasses, the carp in his pond, the deer grazing on the slopes. A

best-selling author and cofounder of the Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom, Hanson is a neuropsychologist who tracks the latest studies about the brain and develops practices around these proven treatments to help people deal with issues like excessive anxiety.

With his maroon sweater, collared shirt, and gentle demeanor, he reminds me a little of my kindergarten Montessori teacher. But from reading his books, I know that Hanson, who started studying at UCLA when he was just 16 years old, is far from elementary in his understanding of the human brain. When he's lecturing at different universities around the world, he often rattles off lines like: "The diencephalon consists of the thalamus and the hypothalamus, which directs your autonomic nervous system and influences your endocrine system through the pituitary gland." But when he is talking to people like me, he leans more toward sayings like, "just because there's that funny feeling in your belly doesn't mean that there's any threat. Our internal signals are pretty much bullshitting us all day long."

I like how direct Hanson is so I launch into a direct question of my own: "Why are we so afraid?"

Hanson gets this question a lot, and he starts off by going back to the Serengeti, that area of Africa where anthropologists say humans first evolved. "So imagine this," says Hanson, "you're living in a small tribe, and to pass on your genes, you've got to find food, have sex, and cooperate with others to help the tribe's children, particularly yours, to have children of their own." Hanson calls these carrots, those positive outcomes luring you forward in life. "But you've also got to hide from predators, steer clear of alpha males and females looking for trouble, and not let other hunter-gatherer bands kill you." And these are the sticks, the negatives. But there is a key difference between carrots and sticks. "If you miss out on a carrot today," Hanson says, "you'll have a chance at more carrots tomorrow. Fail to avoid a stick today and . . . no more carrots forever."

From jellyfish 600 million years ago up to modern technophiles, perpetually prioritizing sticks, we've developed what psychologists often refer to as negativity bias. "Our brains have become like Velcro for negative experiences," Hanson says, "and Teflon for positive ones."

The evidence is easy to find. Psychology researchers at Vanderbilt University recently wired up volunteers and showed them images of positive, neutral, and fearful human faces. People could process fearful faces the quickest—those faces were fast-tracked by the amygdala, the brain's ancient emotional center. When a fearful face flashed, the amygdala lit up even when the face had appeared so briefly that the conscious parts of the brain didn't have time to know what they had processed. But that didn't matter: The fear response was already in full swing. And this wasn't terribly surprising to the researchers. But it did come as a surprise that happy faces took the longest to register. "What we believe is happening," coauthor of the study, David Zald, said, "is that the happy faces signal safety. If something is safe, you don't have to pay attention to it." In other words, evolution doesn't really care if you notice that brief smile from your barista, that sunset. It cares if you survive.

Recognizing—and feeling—happiness is more up to you. The fear comes naturally.

Positive or peak experiences also make a lasting mark, but they seem to in a different way. Harvard psychology professor Daniel Schacter recounts in his book, *The Seven Sins of Memory*, how students in his lab recalled both the positive and negative images (a smiling baby, a disfigured face) better than a neutral image (an ordinary building), but the students recalled the negative images with more acute detail.

The definitive paper on negativity bias, Bad Is Stronger than Good, was written in 2001 by psychologist Kathleen Vohs and colleagues. The researchers compiled study after study showing, for instance, that people become more distressed from losing $50 than they are joyful about winning $50; a single trauma in childhood is more enduring and pervasive down the line than lots of positive childhood experiences; a piece of bad information about someone is more memorable than a piece of good information; and a bad day's negative mood will extend easily into the following day, whereas a good mood from a good day is less

likely to cross the threshold into tomorrow. Many people have also noted that sex, often a positive, can be an equally powerful memory booster as fear or negativity, which makes sense since sex is a biological priority. However, Vohs points to studies that a single negative sexual experience like a rape or trauma is generally more enduring than many positive sexual experiences. The studies Vohs cites go on and on, but "basically," Hanson says, "negativity bias is about survival. Nature likes skittish creatures because skittish creatures survive."

And sometimes this is a good thing. You have a strange feeling about a man in a parking lot and decide to hurry to the car. You feel fatigued and decide to see a doctor. But in today's world, most of the time, Hanson says, our fears are exaggerated. And—as with Halloween candy, sharks, terrorists, and witches—our social structure makes it difficult for us to think or speak independently about the actual risk of things. We suffer from groupthink.

In 1955, a psychologist named Solomon Asch gathered male college students for what he told them was a test in "visual perception." The men were asked to judge pictures of lines of varying length and answer which appeared to be longer.

Example:

Line A _____

Line B _____

Line C _____

When each man was tested alone, he got 99 percent of the questions correct. The answers were obvious. But when Asch put the test subjects, one at a time, in a room full of other men who were secretly in cahoots with Asch and answering most of the questions incorrectly, 75 percent of the test subjects conformed to the group's obviously wrong answers at least once. And more modern variations of this study have shown that when we think an issue is really important, we'll abandon the obvious truth more often.

Fear has made us this way. Over millions of years of surviving better as a group, we came to understand that belonging to the pack meant surviving. "Exile in the Serengeti was a death sentence," Hanson says, "and one of the most horrible things you could do was shun someone." Believing that the group is generally right was also adaptive. If the tribe all thinks that the crew over the mountain is hostile, it was probably better to trust that information than go and propose an intertribal BBQ. If a handful of your friends saw a lion in the grass and you didn't, well, why not take their word for it?

This group trust may have worked well back in the Serengeti, but now we can do our research and find out that, actually, the group isn't always right. Jews don't cause typhus. Not all Muslims are terrorists. Great white sharks aren't out to eat humans.

That said, there is so much information out there, we can't possibly keep up with all the latest data, which is often contradictory. We have to trust in experts and groups of experts,

but this can be challenging too. Experts these days have often been swayed by enormously powerful groups, and decades of research has shown that when people get together in a group, the group tends to reflect, not the average opinion of the individuals that make it up, but the more extreme view. It's doubtful that the witch hunters all believed that witchcraft was a serious threat to society, or that all the Nazis believed Jews caused typhus. But inside the safety of the group, the collective view can become more extreme than the individuals that make it up.

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.

Negativity bias is not just about political or societal issues. It's also about the way we feel about ourselves, individually and collectively, Hanson says, which has to do with those implicit and explicit memories. From neuroscientist Joseph LeDoux, I knew that explicit memories are the conscious ones, the things you could tell a friend about: This is what I ate for dinner last night, and that's what I felt like when I first rode a bike. But the majority of memory is implicit: This is how to walk, and that's how to chew food. With implicit memory, the brain sends its signals to the rest of the body unconsciously. But Hanson explains that implicit memories include much more than just instructions for movement. Implicit memories form the interior landscape of your mind: relationship models, your general outlook and attitude, your beliefs about what you're capable of—all assembled by the traces of your life experiences. And since we're all born with a negativity bias forming part of our interior landscape, these negative beliefs—I'm a terrible public speaker, I'll always be overweight—become fairly set in their ways. These negative feedback loops take up prime brain real estate and they end up controlling our actions to a much larger degree than we'd like.

Malcolm Gladwell pointed this out in *The New Yorker*, citing a study by Julio Garcia, a psychology professor at Tufts. Garcia gathered a group of white athletic students who were asked to perform the standing broad jump, vertical leap, and push-ups within 20 seconds. The athletes were then asked to repeat the series and, as expected, they improved a little on each the second time around. A little experience gave them more confidence. Garcia then did the same thing with a second group of students, but he replaced the instructor for the second set with an African American. This time, the white students didn't get any higher on their vertical. So he repeated again, switching the second-round instructor for a taller, heavier African American. On that round, the white students couldn't even jump as high as their original leap. The push-ups went unchanged, however. And this makes sense. The common societal belief is not, after all, that whites can't do push-ups as well as blacks. As Gladwell noted: It's that white men can't jump.

In that first essay on negativity bias, Bad Is Stronger than Good, the researchers made sure to note: "This is not to say that bad will always triumph over good, spelling doom and

misery for the human race. Rather, good may prevail over bad by superior force of numbers: Many good events can overcome the psychological affects of a single bad one."

New research suggests, however, that it doesn't take a lot of good events to begin to change negativity bias – it takes convincing events. In a fascinating study, Ray Friedman, a management professor at Vanderbilt, and colleagues, asked black and white students to take a standardized test before and after Barack Obama's inauguration speech. Before taking the test, students read that the exam was "created by the Massachusetts Aptitude Assessment Center, and is used as a diagnostic tool to assess verbal problem-solving ability." The students also had to note their race before taking the exam, all of which was meant to trigger the stereotype that blacks perform poorly on cognitive aptitude tests. This setup was all based on a previous research on what's usually called stereotype threat, and it seems to work with all sorts of common stereotypes. Ask girls to check a box to indicate "male or female" before taking a math test and they perform worse than they do when they're not reminded in this way of the stereotype that "boys are better at math." Ask white males to take a math test that they're told Asian Americans perform particularly well on and they perform worse than if they weren't reminded of the stereotype that "Asians are the best at math." So, not surprisingly, Friedman's setup worked. Before the inauguration, white students scored significantly higher on the aptitude test (12.1 for whites compared to 8.8 for blacks). But here's what was surprising: After the inauguration speech, the black students' scores were so close to the same as the whites' that researchers considered the difference statistically insignificant. The scores were even closer among students who had watched the speech.

Examples like this are precisely why Hanson says it's possible for us each to debunk negativity bias by emphasizing the opposite, the good stuff. Obama's inauguration was incredibly emotional for many African Americans, and those emotions were able to undo a small portion of negative stereotypes in a concrete way, at least briefly. But we don't need a huge event to happen, Hanson says. "There is good stuff happening all around us that we tend to just ignore," he says. Appreciate the leaves while you walk during lunch break, the

novel you get to read before bed. The studies show, Hanson says, that the longer that something is held in the mind and the more emotionally stimulating it is, the more neurons in the brain that "fire and wire" together, making the memory stronger. Hanson calls this turbo charging the good, and while it may seem like sugarcoating, it's actually training your brain to emphasize all the stuff evolution has trained it to ignore.

Good thoughts can be as powerful as good events. Hanson recommends starting with thoughts of loved ones. "We're so deeply social," he tells me, "I often start there." The way to do this is by just imagining, anytime of day or night, some person or a group of people who love you and support you. Imagine yourself with those people and how good it feels to be with them. The key, Hanson says, is really letting the emotions of goodness flood your body. By holding this imagery and feeling in your mind, you're actually strengthening neural networks and stimulating oxytocin, the body's bonding hormone, which decreases the fearful freezing response. Doing this often, you'll build a strong base, so you're not so

easily swayed by your own negative feedback loops.

If you suffer from anxiety, Hanson also recommends emphasizing memories of times when you felt strong. "For me," he says, "it's rock climbing, or sometimes I remember a time I really had to stand up for my family when someone was being an asshole." Each time you recall a time you felt strong, and really feel that strength in your limbs, you're again solidifying a positive neural network. "What makes people fearful," Hanson says, "is a combination of the appraisal of the world and an appraisal of their own capacities. So, if on a zero-to-ten scale, you appraise your capacities as a two, and the issue in the world is a three, you're going to be kind of scared. Whereas if you appraise your capacity as a seven or eight and this thing, broadly defined, in life coming at you is a three, all right, you might be a little nervous about it, you're on your guard, but you're not going to freak out."

There is evidence that focusing on the positive can improve over time with practice, much like strengthening a muscle. Buddhist monks, for example, focus every single day on prayers of compassion, or metta, and neuroscientists have begun to demonstrate how this

changes their brains. Antoine Lutz of the University of Wisconsin, for example recently measured the gamma wave activity in the brain of a French-born Buddhist monk, Matthieu Riccard, who had completed more than 10,000 hours of meditation. Gamma waves are a pattern of neural oscillation that some scientists think are related to how consciousness arises and unifies (a hotly debated issue in neuroscience). Whether they are or not, gamma wave oscillations are usually so faint, they're barely observable. But when Riccard's bald head was rigged with 128 electrodes and he began to focus on compassion and loving kindness, Lutz could see the waves oscillating more clearly than ever. Lutz and the other researchers had never seen anything like it. They wired up more Buddhist monks and asked some nonmeditating college students to come in as controls. When the monks focused on compassion, they produced gamma waves that were 30 times as strong as the controls, and the researchers saw much of the activity in areas of the brain associated with positive emotions.

Hanson, a longtime meditation practitioner and teacher, points out that it's a bit ironic that science is only now figuring out the benefits of meditation since, more than 2,500 years ago, the Buddha taught his students to meditate in a way that some doctors and psychologists are only now finding is so helpful. "A monk," the Buddha tells his students in one of the ancient Pali sutras, "sits down with his legs crossed, keeps his body erect and his mindfulness alert. Ever mindful he breathes in, mindful he breathes out. Breathing in a long breath, he knows, 'I am breathing in a long breath'; breathing out a long breath, he knows, 'I am breathing out a long breath'; breathing in a short breath, he knows, 'I am breathing in a short breath'; breathing out a short breath, he knows, 'I am breathing out a short breath.'

The Buddha's instructions went on to say that the monk should be mindful of every sensation and thought "whether standing or walking, seated or lying down," and should constantly reflect on compassion for all living beings. And once certain faculties of concentration were built up, the Buddha recommended his students also look into what their thoughts are. "Suppose," he said, "in the last month of the hot season, at high noon, a shimmering mirage appears. A person of good sight would inspect it, and it would appear

to them to be empty hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in a mirage? So too whatever kind of perception there is . . . a person inspects it, ponders it, and carefully investigates it, and it would appear to them empty, hollow, insubstantial. For what substance could there be in perception?"

What the Buddha was pointing to, says Hanson, is a very scientific idea: that our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and sensations exist in the mind, but they don't actually exist in some hard or permanent way. Fear is not a thing that exists out there. It arises in the mind and ceases in mind. It comes into being and passes away: impermanent. So what substance is there in it really?

Hanson says meditation is one of the best tools to debunk negativity bias. Through regular meditation, people can start to become familiar with their mental patterns, observing them rather than just automatically buying into them. And when the mind is constantly scattered, it's difficult to even notice how automatic negativity bias is. When the mind settles down a little through regular practice, it's easier to emphasize the good because we're taking note of what's actually in front of us.

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Jaimal Yogis is a writer with a life-long passion for understanding the mind and body. His first book, a coming-of-age memoir called *Saltwater Buddha*, was internationally-praised and is currently being made into a film. Jaimal's second book, *The Fear Project*, is a personal and journalistic investigation into our most primal emotion. His writing has also appeared in ESPN Magazine, The Washington Post, Surfer Magazine, Tricycle, Shambhala Sun, Men's Health, Runner's World, and many others. More at www.jaimalyogis.com.

Fare Well

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