



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

“Hardwiring Happiness”: How to Have More Positive Experiences in Your Life

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

28 August 2016

frederickuu.org

Last month, Magin and I had the opportunity to attend an eight-day meditation retreat in North Carolina through an organization called **Buddhist Geeks**. One central question for this group is “**How can we serve the convergence of Buddhism with rapidly evolving technology and an increasingly global culture?**” I described this approach in a sermon a few years ago on Pragmatic Buddhism, Westernized Dharma, and 21st-century Sangha. The basic idea is that in contrast to believing stories of what someone allegedly experienced thousands of years ago, **Pragmatic Buddhism** emphasizes what you can confirm in your own firsthand experience. **Westernized Dharma** seeks to integrate Western psychology, modern science, and contemporary technology into traditional Buddhist teachings. And **Twenty-first century Sangha** means building a Buddhist community that is relevant for our time.

There were at least three major ways we experimented with this perspective at the retreat. First, rather than focusing on one Buddhist tradition, there was a “**multi-traditional**” approach, drawing freely from many different Buddhist paths for whatever is helpful today. Second, in addition to lots of individual meditation time, there was also “**social meditation**” in which we

explored with what it might look like to not only meditate together in the same room, but also to practice techniques that are only possible with groups of three or more people. Finally, rather than banning technology, as is common on contemplative retreats, there was one “**contemplative technology**” period each day after lunch in which we were invited to experiment with using technology more mindfully and compassionately.

I should add, for anyone curious, that **an eight-day meditation retreat does *not* mean that you spend 8+ hours a day sitting on a meditation cushion without a break.** The longest period we spent in seated-meditation at any one time was forty-five minutes. Then, there would be a period of moving meditation before the next round of seated meditation. (This practice of alternating sitting and moving is quite common on meditation retreats.)

For me, the greatest benefit of this and other similar retreats I have attended in the past was having so many days in a row to expansively explore contemplative practices such as concentration, awareness, insight, heartfulness, and mindfulness. But I will confess that even though I am a professional spiritual leader, it is often hard for me to carve out time for daily spiritual practice amidst the demands of life. **It is all too easy for me to slip into a pattern in which I feel like I need to get everything done on my ever-expanding “to do” list before I can give myself permission to meditate.** Not surprisingly, that approach results in little time on my meditation cushion — even though I know that the inverse approach is much wiser and saner. When I carve out twenty to forty-five minutes to meditate — ideally first thing in the morning — there is a positive impact on the rest of the day as well as a cumulative impact.

I find it difficult sometimes to prioritize meditation, even though I know a fair amount about the mounting scientific evidence that a regular meditation practice:

- Increases gray matter in the [brain];
- Reduces cortical thinning due to aging in prefrontal regions;
- Improves... attention, compassion, and empathy
- Increases activation of left frontal regions, which lifts mood
- Decreases stress-related cortisol
- Strengthens the immune system
- Helps a variety of medical conditions, including cardiovascular disease, asthma, type II diabetes, PMS, and chronic pain
- Helps numerous psychological conditions, including insomnia, anxiety, phobias, and eating disorders. (85-86)

By no means is meditation a cure-all, but it does have many measurable positive impacts.

All that being said, I have no delusions of converting all of you to a daily meditation practice with a list of scientific data, because I can't even fully convert myself. Life is messier and more complex than that. I would, however, like to share with you a few simple steps along these same lines. My inspiration is the book Hardwiring Happiness by the neuropsychologist Dr. Rick Hanson. Some of you may be familiar with his earlier — and also excellent — book Buddha's Brain. One of my biggest takeaways from that earlier book is that we humans have evolved to have a “negativity bias” (48). In Hanson's memorable phrase, **our brains are “like Velcro for negative experiences and Teflon for positive experiences” (68).**

There is a good reason that political philosophers describe the life of our ancient ancestors as one of “continual fear and danger of violent death, and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short” (Hobbes, Leviathan, XIII.9). **“For millions of years...**

starvation, predators, and disease...kept hominid and human population levels essentially flat despite potential growth rates of about 2 percent per year” (129).

Today, in contrast, we live in a different world. **The sharp decline in threat from starvation, predators, and disease is evidenced by our human population ballooning to more than 7 billion people** with no sign of leveling out anytime soon. But the negativity bias that kept our ancestors alive long enough to pass on their genes inhibits our wellbeing today.

Because of our negativity bias, scientists estimate that many of us need a **“three-to-one ratio” of positive-to-negative moments** (ideally higher) to counterbalance the way that our brains fixate on the negative (20).

So I would like to share with you a simple technique both for cultivating more positive experiences and for allowing positive experiences to sink in through our Teflon brain bias. In my spiritual direction training, the word we used for this practice was **savoring**. When something good happens, *slow down*. Take a few deep breaths and notice all the aspects of the experience that are pleasurable. This practice can be done a few times a day — for as little as five, ten, or twenty seconds. It is an incredibly simple, but effective way of increasing the ratio of positive to negative experiences in your life.

Savoring also helps overcome the way our brain can be like Teflon for positive experiences. When you linger for a few moments on pleasurable experiences, you help take positive moments that might otherwise have been fleeting and embed them more deeply. To quote another of those catch phrases from neuropsychology circles, **“Neurons that fire together, wire together”** (5).

Dr. Hanson’s acronym for this approach is **HEAL**:

1. **Have** a positive experience.
2. **Enrich** it.
3. **Absorb** it.
4. **Link** positive and negative material.

Part of me prefers the simple one-part practice of savoring, but there is some wisdom in Hanson's more nuanced process.

To give a brief overview, in step one, **“Have a positive experience,”** Hanson is using the word experience intentionally. He wants to us to **move *from* fleeting pleasures or passing positive thoughts to “emotionally rewarding experiences.”** Importantly, you do not have to wait around until something good comes your way. This process works equally well if you take time to savor moments from your past: “think about things for which you’re grateful, bring to mind a friend, or recognize a task you’ve completed.” The point is taking time to savor a pleasurable part of your life and increase your ratio of positive to negative experiences.

Step two, the “E” in HEAL, is **“Enrich it.”** Take a few deep breaths and allow yourself to linger on the experience for five seconds, ten seconds, or longer. Notice your feelings as well as *where* you experience these feelings in your body: “Gently encourage the experience to be more intense...” (61).

Step three, the “A” in HEAL, is **“Absorb it.”** Set an intention along the lines of, “I want to really allow these experience to sink in.” You may also want to experiment with visualizing the experience (or a symbol of the experience) sinking into your chest — or perhaps sinking into your head and slowly descending into your heart. Hanson writes, “Know that the experience is becoming part of you, a resource inside that you can take with you wherever you go.” These

experiences that we consciously integrate can be powerful lifelines when the inevitable negative experiences come along (62).

Finally, step four, the “L” in HEAL is “**Link positive and negative material.**” Hanson adds this step as an optional, advanced final step of beginning to uproot all the ways our negativity bias has embedded far more negative experiences in our brain than we would like. When attempting to savor a positive experience, you may sometimes find that a negative association arising in the background. For example, while attempting to savor a wonderful moment of connection with a friend, you might “sense this experience making contact with feelings of loneliness from your past.” Hanson writes:

If the negative material hijacks your attention, drop it and focus only on the positive; when you feel reentered in the positive, you can let the negative also be present in awareness if you like.... Then, to continue uprooting the negative material, a few times over the next hour be aware of only neutral or positive material while also bringing to mind neutral things (e.g., people, situation, ideas) that have become associated with the negative material. (63)

Over time, what you are doing is slowly changing the pattern of how your brain free associates. A fancy name for this dynamic is “*self-directed neuroplasticity*” (14). More colloquially, Hanson calls it “hardwiring happiness.”

There’s a lot more to say about all of this, and Hanson’s book Hardwiring Happiness has a *ton* of simple practices for increasingly incorporating these techniques in your everyday life. But overall the major paradigm shift he is seeking to cultivate is spending much more time with

our brains in what he calls the “green” Responsive Mode and much less time with our brains in “red” Reactive Mode.

When we’re in “red” Reactive mode, the amygdala — those two almond-shaped clusters of densely packed neurons in the temporal lobes of our brains — is dominating our brain. The amygdala controls instinctual responses, and has been called the “**fight or flight**” —or “**have-sex-with-it-or-kill-it**” — **part of the brain** (35-36). By no means am I saying that we want to get rid of the amygdala. This evolutionary inheritance from our ancestors, which can save our life in a high-threat situation, can also cause us to exist in a state of ratcheted-up anxiety all the time. As an alternative, contemplative practices allow us to cultivate those more evolved parts of ourselves that the prefrontal cortex makes possible: compassion, clarity, concentration, and equanimity. Whether we choose a high-impact daily meditation practice and/or a lower-impact, multiple-times-a-day savoring practice, we can enhance our capacity to live as our best selves, acting out of our prefrontal cortex, not our “monkey mind” reptilian brain.

For now, I’ll leave the final words to Rick Hanson:

The reactive mode of the brain has worked very well for survival for most of human history, but today it is stressing our whole planet. For more than 99 percent of the past 60 million years, our human and primate ancestors lived in small hunter-gatherer groups in which staying alive required identifying with “us” and mistrusting and often attacking “them.” Now these reactive tendencies fuel conflicts... **We’ve armed a Stone Age brain with nuclear weapons.** Meanwhile, the fearful, greedy, and self-centered reactive setting of the brain promotes a kind

of gorging of the earth's limited resources that is causing deforestation, mass extinctions, and global warming.

Imagine a world in which a critical mass of human brains...spend most if not all of each day in the responsive mode. Eventually there would come a tipping point.... **People would still lock their doors at night, still reach for a profit, and still disagree and compete with one another.... But the ancient fires of fear, frustration, and heartache would be banked low or extinguished for lack of fuel.**

Remember how you feel when you are resting in a basic sense of peace, contentment, and love. Remember what it's like to be with others who are also rested in this state of being. Imagine what your family would be like, your workplace and your community, too, if most everyone in it were centered in the responsive mode. (221-222)

The most exciting part is that this vision does not merely have to end in our imaginations. There are simple, practical steps that we can take for ourselves — and that we can teach to others — of cultivating more compassion, calm, and contentment in ourselves.