

“Bahiya, you should train yourself thus.”

In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. To the heard, only the heard. To the sensed, only the sensed. To the cognized, only the cognized.

When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in the heard, only the sensed in the sensed, only the cognized in the cognized, then, Bahiya, there's no you in that.

When there's no you in that, there's no you there. When there's no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two.

This, just this, is the end of all suffering.

Not-Self in the Brain:

Insights from Neuroscience about Not Taking Life Personally

Spirit Rock Meditation Center

December 11, 2010

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Richard Mendius, M.D.

www.WiseBrain.org

Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom

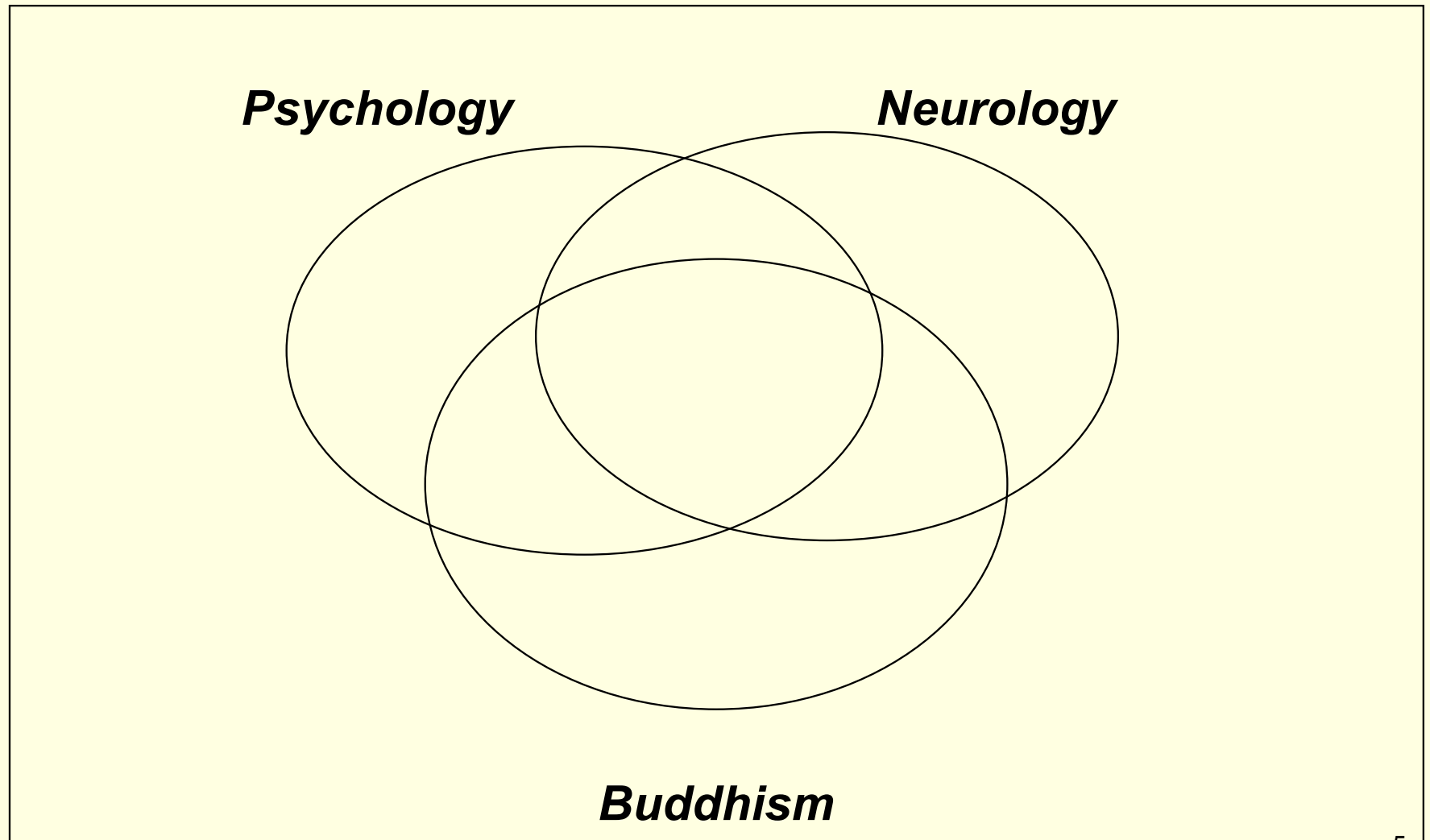
Topics

- **“Self” in the mind**
- **“Self” in the brain**
- **Healthy narcissistic supplies**
- **“Doing” and “Being”**
- **“Only the seen in the seen . . .”**



Perspectives

Common - and Fertile - Ground



*The history of science is rich in the example
of the fruitfulness of bringing
two sets of techniques, two sets of ideas,
developed in separate contexts
for the pursuit of new truth,
into touch with one another.*

J. Robert Oppenheimer

*Do not go by oral tradition, by lineage of teaching, by hearsay,
by a collection of texts, by logic, by inferential reasoning,
by reasoned cognition, by the acceptance of a view after
pondering it, by the seeming competence of a speaker,
or because you think, “this . . . is our teacher.”*

*But when you know for yourselves, “these things are wholesome,
these things are blameless; these things are praised
by the wise; these things, if undertaken and practiced,
lead to welfare and happiness,”
then you should engage in them.*

*When the facts change,
I change my mind, sir.*

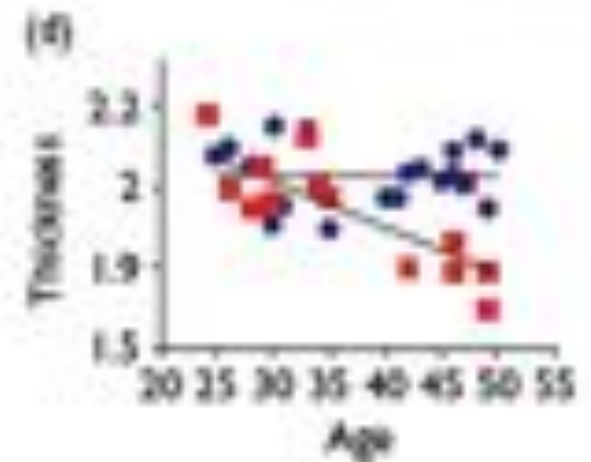
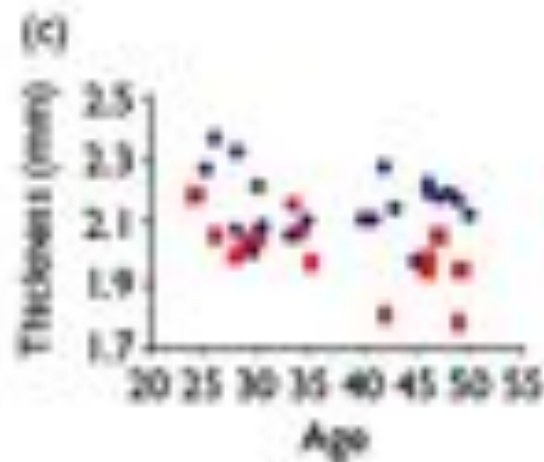
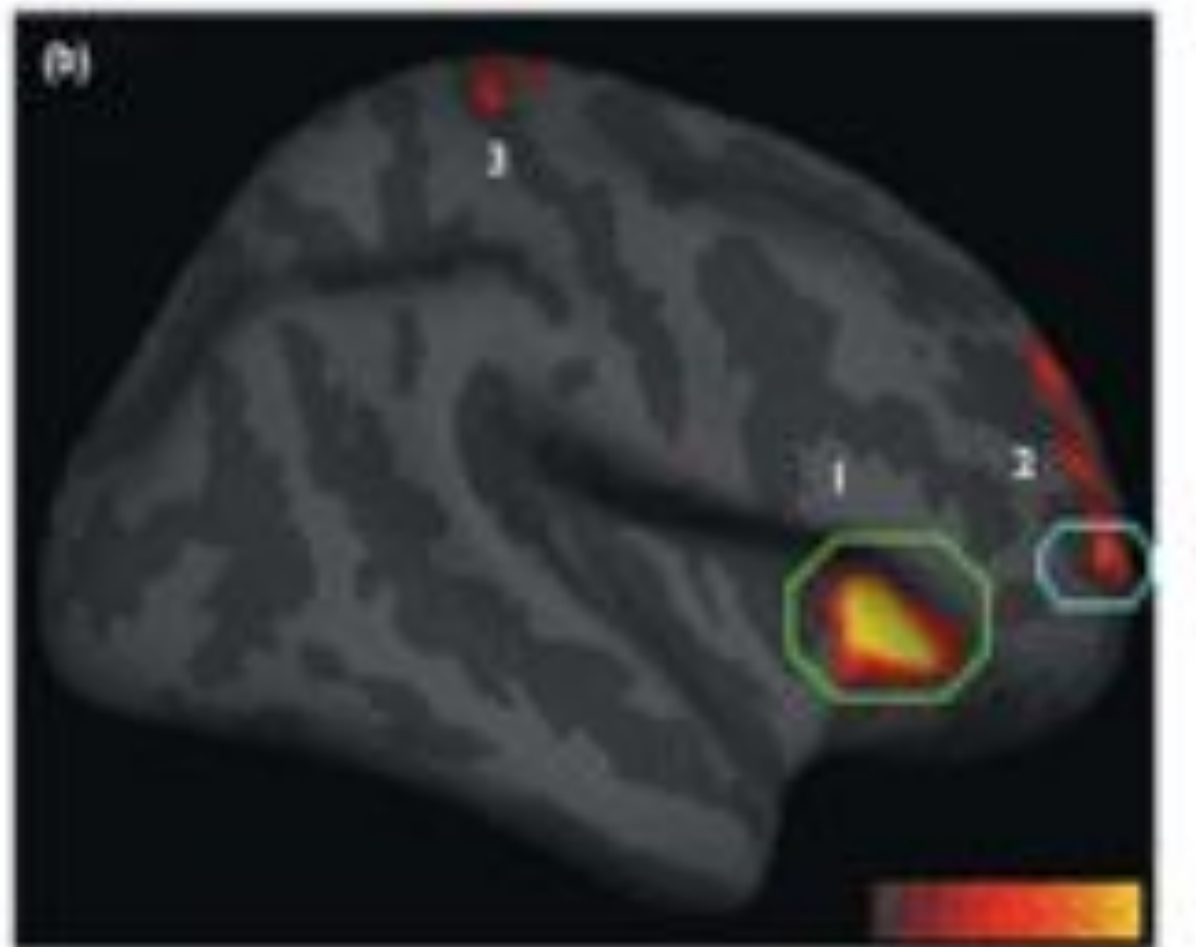
What do you do?

John Maynard Keynes

Mind Changes Brain in Lasting Ways

- What flows through the mind sculpts your brain. Immaterial experience leaves material traces behind.
- Increased blood/nutrient flow to active regions
- Altered epigenetics (gene expression)
- “Neurons that fire together wire together.”
 - Increasing excitability of active neurons
 - Strengthening existing synapses
 - Building new synapses; thickening cortex
 - Neuronal “pruning” - “use it or lose it”

Lazar, et al. 2005.
Meditation
experience is
associated
with increased
cortical thickness.
Neuroreport, 16,
1893-1897.



Physical Effects of Meditation

- Thickens and strengthens anterior (frontal) cingulate cortex and insula. Results include improved attention, empathy, and compassion.
- Less cortical thinning with aging
- Increases activation of left frontal regions, which lifts mood
- Increases power and reach of gamma-range brainwaves
- Decreases stress-related cortisol
- Stronger immune system

Honoring Experience

One's experience *matters*.

Both for how it feels in the moment and for the lasting residues it leaves behind, woven into the fabric of a person's brain and being.

Basics of Meditation

- Relax
- Posture that is comfortable and alert
- Simple good will toward yourself
- Awareness of your body
- Focus on something to steady your attention
- Accepting whatever passes through awareness, not resisting it or chasing it
- Gently settling into peaceful well-being

Foundations of Meditation

- Setting an intention - “top-down” frontal lobes, “bottom-up” limbic system
- Relaxing the body - parasympathetic nervous system
- Feeling safer - inhibits amygdala/ hippocampus vigilance circuits
- Evoking positive emotion - dopamine, norepinephrine
- Absorbing the benefits - primes memory circuits throughout the brain

Penetrative insight

joined with calm abiding

utterly eradicates

afflicted states.

Shantideva



“Self” in the Mind

Definitions

- **Person** - The body-mind as a whole
 - Contains knowledge, personal memories, skills, temperament, personality tendencies, mood, etc.
 - Has considerable consistency over time
 - Deserves kindness and justice; is morally culpable

- **Self** - “I, me, and mine”
 - The psychological self; the “I” in “I am happy, I want a cookie, I know $2+2=4$, I am for justice”; the “me” in “Do you love me?”
 - Sense of being the owner of experiences and the agent of actions

- **Awareness** - The field in which the mind (as yet mysteriously) represents aspects of the mind to itself
 - The “global workspace” in which representations of the person, self-related functions, and subjectivity arise and pass away

Conventional Notions of “Self”

- **Unified** - coherent; just one; a being, an entity; some one looking out through your eyes.
- **Stable** - unchanging in its fundamentals; the core self as a child still feels present in you today
- **Independent** - things happen to the self, but it remains free of their effects in its essence.
- **Identity** - That which one is; that with which there is the greatest identification

Actual Experience of “Self”

- **Compounded** – Made up of many parts; one self vows to exercise early, another self turns off the alarm clock
- **Impermanent** – More or less present at different times; different aspects come forward at different times
- **Dependent** – Developed in interactions with caregivers and peers and encounters with the world; grounded in evolution; activating and deactivating as a means to the ends of the organism; especially responsive to opportunities and threats; self organizes around clinging; there is a process of *selfing* rather than a static, fixed, unchanging entity.
- **Part of the person** – There is awareness of aspects of self as contents within awareness like any others

The dualistic ego-mind is essentially a survival mechanism, on a par with the fangs, claws, stingers, scales, shells, and quills that other animals use to protect themselves.

By maintaining a separate self-sense, it attempts to provide a haven of security.

Yet the very boundaries that create a sense of safety also leave us feeling cut off and disconnected.

Actual Experience of “Self”

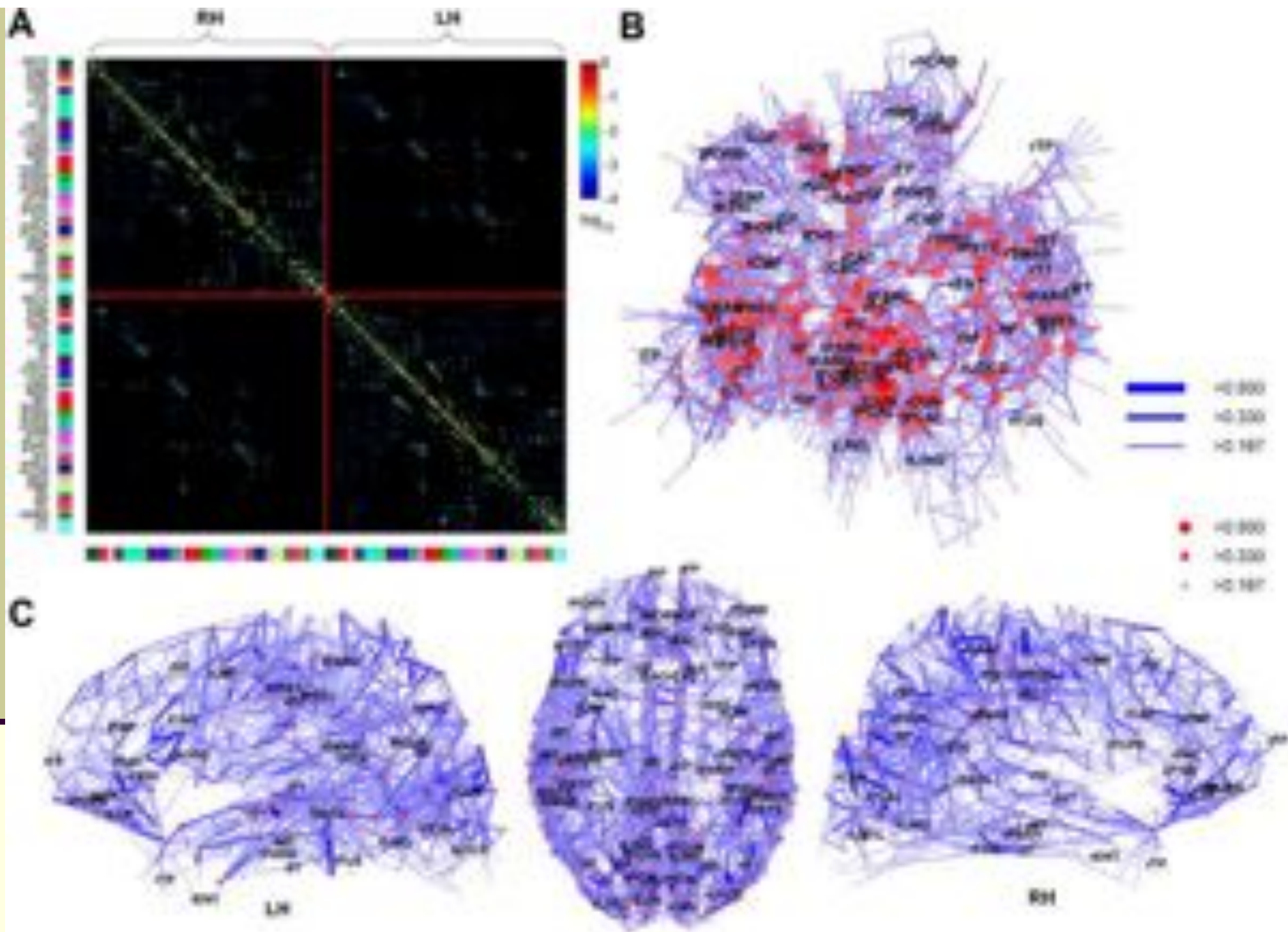
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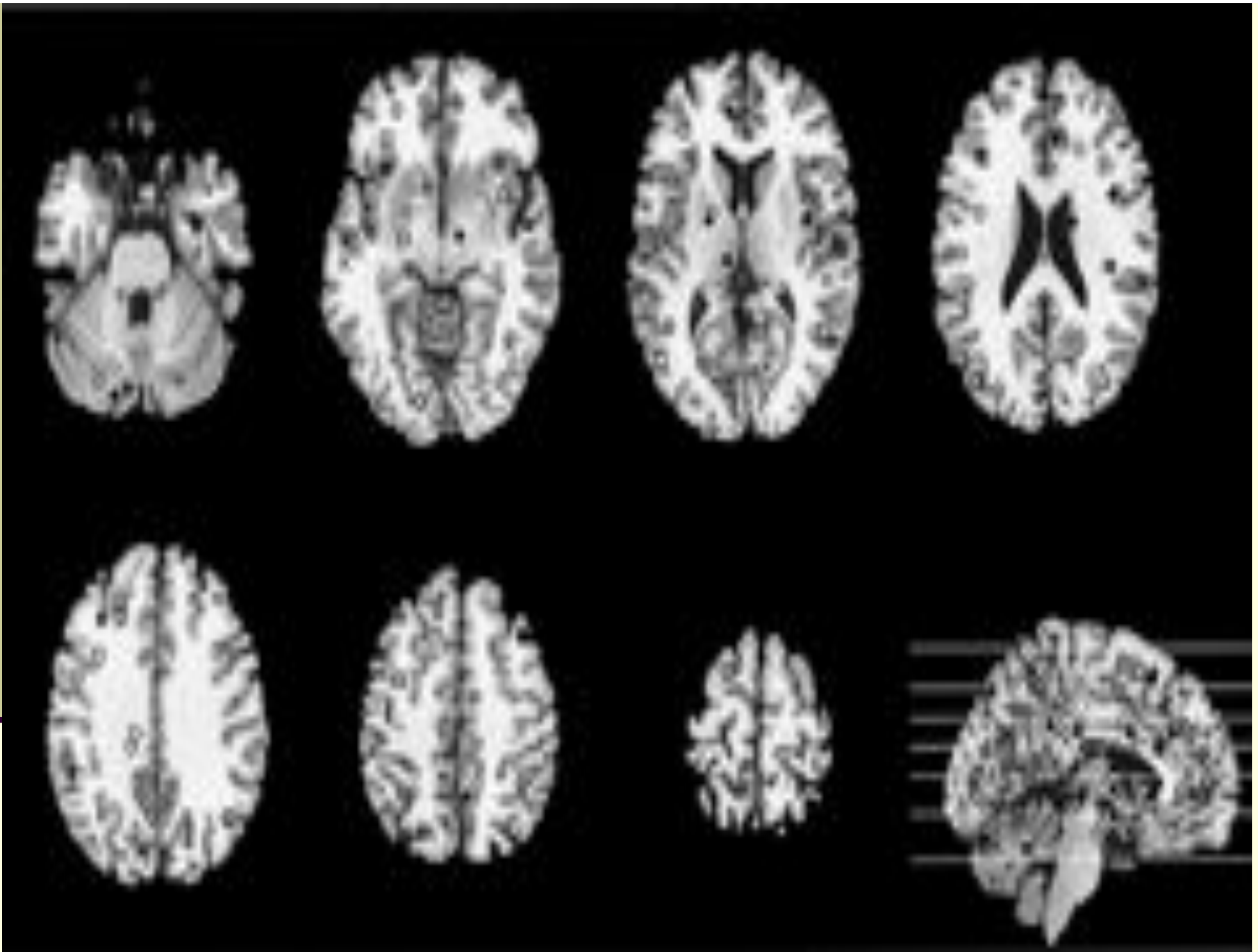


“Self” in the Brain

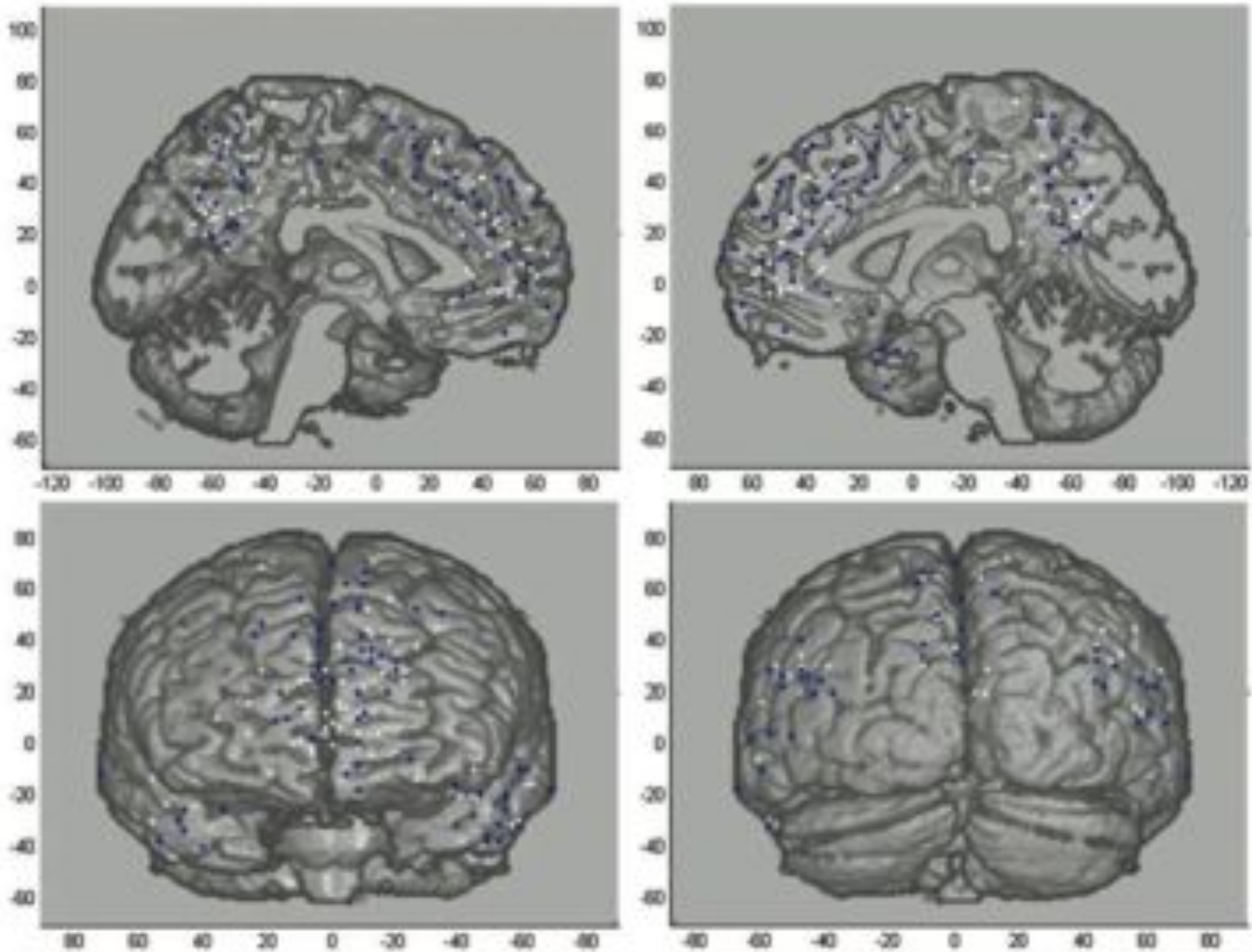
Properties of Self in Your Brain

- **Compounded** – Distributed systems and sub-systems; no homunculus looking through your eyes
- **Impermanent** – Circuits light up and deactivate; fluid, transient
- **Dependent** – Dependent on neural structures and processes; dependent on the evolution of specialized neural tissues (e.g., spindle cells); responsive to stimuli;
- **Part of the person** – Self-related activations in neural circuitry are just a tiny fraction of the total activations in the brain
 - The neural circuitry associated with self representations or functions also performs many other activities unrelated to self.
 - In the brain, self is not special.





Brain activations of “selfing” - Gillihan, et al., Psych Bulletin, 1/2005



Legrand and Ruby, 2009. What is self-specific? [White = self; blue = other]

Subjectivity Doesn't Equal a Subject

- Ordinary awareness has an inherent subjectivity, a localization to a particular perspective (e.g., to my body, not yours).
- The brain indexes across experiences of subjectivity to create an apparent subject.
- That apparent subject is elaborated and layered through the maturation of the brain, notably regions of the prefrontal cortex.
- But there is no subject *inherent* in subjectivity!
- Awareness requires subjectivity, but not a subject.

What Self?

In sum, from a neurological standpoint, the everyday feeling of being a unified self is an utter illusion:

- The apparently coherent and solid “I” is actually built from many neural subsystems, with no fixed center.
- The apparently stable “I” is produced by variable and transient activations of neural circuits.
- The apparently independent “I” depends on neural circuitry, the evolutionary processes that built them, critical interactions with others to shape those circuits, and the stimuli of the moment.

Neurologically, self is “empty” - without absolute, inherent existence.

Selflessness is not a case of something that existed in the past becoming nonexistent. Rather, this sort of “self” is something that never did exist. What is needed is to identify as nonexistent something that always was nonexistent.

The Dalai Lama

When we recognize that the things we identify as our self are impermanent and bound up with suffering, we realize they lack the essential marks of authentic selfhood and we thereby stop identifying with them.

Bhikkhu Bodhi

Self Is Like a Unicorn

- Self-related patterns of information and neural activity are as real as those that underlie the smell of roses.
- But that which they point to – a unified, enduring, independent “I” – just doesn’t exist.
- Just because we have a sense of self does not mean that we are a self. The brain strings together heterogenous moments of self-ing and subjectivity into an illusion of homogenous coherence and continuity.
- Real representations in the brain of a horse point to something that is also real. But the real representations of a unicorn in the brain point to something that is not real.
- The real representations of the self in the brain point to another mythical creature: the apparent self.

“Self” Has Its Uses

- A convenient way to distinguish one person from another
- Brings a sense of continuity to life’s experiences
- Adds verve and commitment to relationships
- People without self structures have impaired relationships.
- Self-related processes helped our ancestors succeed in increasingly social hunter-gatherer bands in which interpersonal dynamics played a strong role in survival.
- The evolution of relationships fostered the evolution of self and vice versa; the benefits of self have thus been a factor in the evolution of the brain.
- Self has been stitched into human DNA by reproductive advantages slowly accumulating across a hundred thousand generations.

Selfing Leads to Suffering

- When “I, me, and mine” are mental objects like any other, there’s no problem.
 - For example, the Buddha routinely used “I” and “you.”
- But when we privilege self-representations through identifying with them or defending or glorifying them . . . Then we suffer, and create suffering for others.
- The key is to be able to move dextrously into and back out of self-representations; that’s skillful means.

*No self,
no problem*

*Blissful is passionlessness in the world,
The overcoming of sensual desires;
But the abolition of the conceit I am --
That is truly the supreme bliss.*

The Buddha, Udāna 2.11

To study the Way is to study the self.

To study the self is to forget the self.

*To forget the self is
To be enlightened by all things.*

Dogen



Healthy “Narcissistic Supplies”

Feeding the Hungry Heart

- Healthy development requires caregivers to give a child extensive mirroring, attunement, and prizing; healthy adult relationships require much the same.
- These are normal “narcissistic supplies.” Deficits in them lead to:
 - Feelings of inadequacy, worthlessness, and shame
 - Tendencies toward extremes of clinging or distance
- As an adult, you can take in narcissistic supplies, gradually weaving them into your brain and your being.
- This is not clinging to praise, etc. It is filling the hole in your heart so your happiness is increasingly unconditional - not dependent on external events.

“Anthem”

*Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in
That's how the light gets in*

Leonard Cohen

How to Take in the Good

1. Look for positive **facts**, and let them become positive experiences.
2. Savor the positive experience:
 - Sustain it for 10-20-30 seconds.
 - Feel it in your body and emotions.
 - Intensify it.
3. Sense and intend that the positive experience is soaking into your brain and body - registering deeply in emotional memory.

Feeling Cared About

- As we evolved, we increasingly turned to and relied on others to feel safer and less threatened.
 - Exile from the band was a death sentence in the Serengeti.
 - Attachment behaviors: relying on the secure base
 - The well-documented power of social support to buffer stress and aid recovery from painful experiences

- Methods:
 - Recognize it's kind to others to feel cared about yourself.
 - Look for occasions to feel cared about and take them in.
 - Deliberately bring to mind the experience of being cared about in challenging situations.
 - Be caring yourself.

Feeling Prized

- It is natural and important to feel that your person is special to others: appreciated, acknowledged, respected, cherished, prized.

- Bring to mind experiences of:
 - Being praised, complimented, acknowledged
 - A time you knew you were appreciated, perhaps after some contribution or generosity
 - Being wanted by someone; wanted by a group
 - Feeling cherished by someone

- In daily life, look for experiences of being prized, including in small ways, and then savor them so they sink in.

Feeling Like a Good Person

- Everyone has good qualities. No halo is required to have patience, determination, fairness, curiosity, honesty, kindness, etc.
- Recognizing these qualities in yourself is simply seeing reality with clear eyes, just like recognizing good food in your cupboard or good qualities in another person.
- Methods:
 - Pick a good quality that you know you have.
 - Pay attention to any obstructions to recognizing and appreciating this good quality. Let them be . . . then let them go and return attention to the good quality.
 - Gather evidence for this good quality in you (e.g., examples).
 - Be mindful of what the good quality feels like in your body and mind; let it sink in.
 - Consider how this good quality contributes to yourself and to others.
 - Open to a simple gladness for this good quality; let it sink in.



Takng Life Less Personally

Relaxing Selfing: Perspectives

- You need a coherence of person to relax selfing.
- Cautions: dissociative disorders; borderline personality disorder; “spacey, airy” people
- Distinguish between the person (the body-mind as a whole) and the apparent self (the supposedly unified, stable, and independent owner of experiences and agent of actions).
- Enjoy the peace of less selfing.

Using Mindfulness to Relax Selfing

- Notice how little “I” there is in many activities (e.g., reaching for salt, cuddling); take in that sense of minimal selfing combined with life being OK.
- Notice how “I” changes; see how it grows in response to threats, opportunities, and contact with others; consider the apparent “I” as a process rather than as an being.
- Focus on present moment experience as a process.
- Be mindful of yourself as the protagonist in the “mini-movies” running in the mind.
- Be careful about attributing intentions to others that are about you personally.



**In addition to mindful investigations of the apparent “self,”
what experiential practices could help relax selfing?**



“Doing” and “Being”

Dual Modes

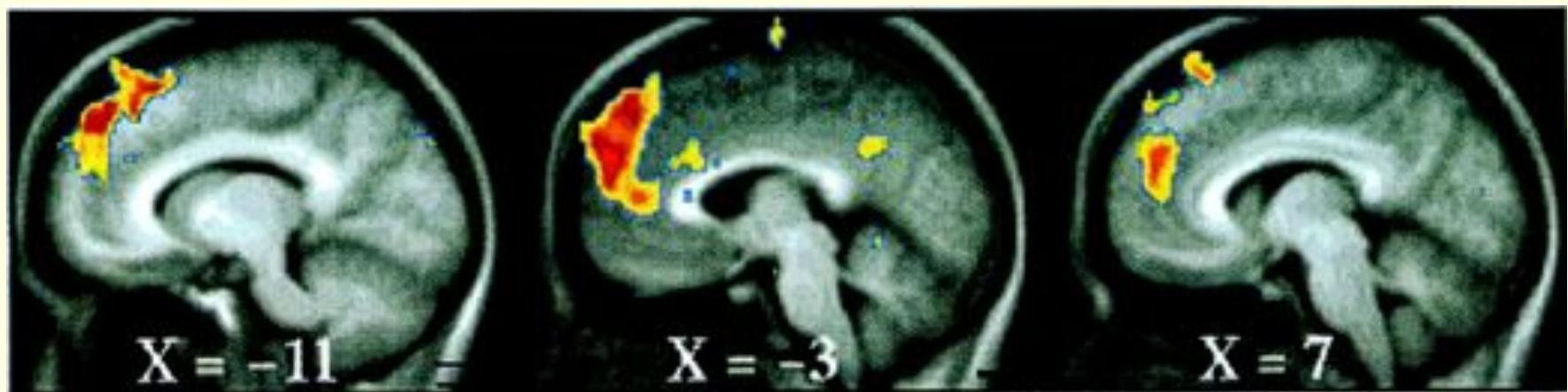
“Doing”

Mainly representational
Much verbal activity
Abstract
Future- or past-focused
Recursive contents of mind
Goal-directed
Sense of craving
Personal, self-oriented perspective
Firm beliefs
Evaluative
Lost in thought, mind wandering
Tightly connected experiences
Focal view
Prominent self-as-object
Prominent self-as-subject

“Being”

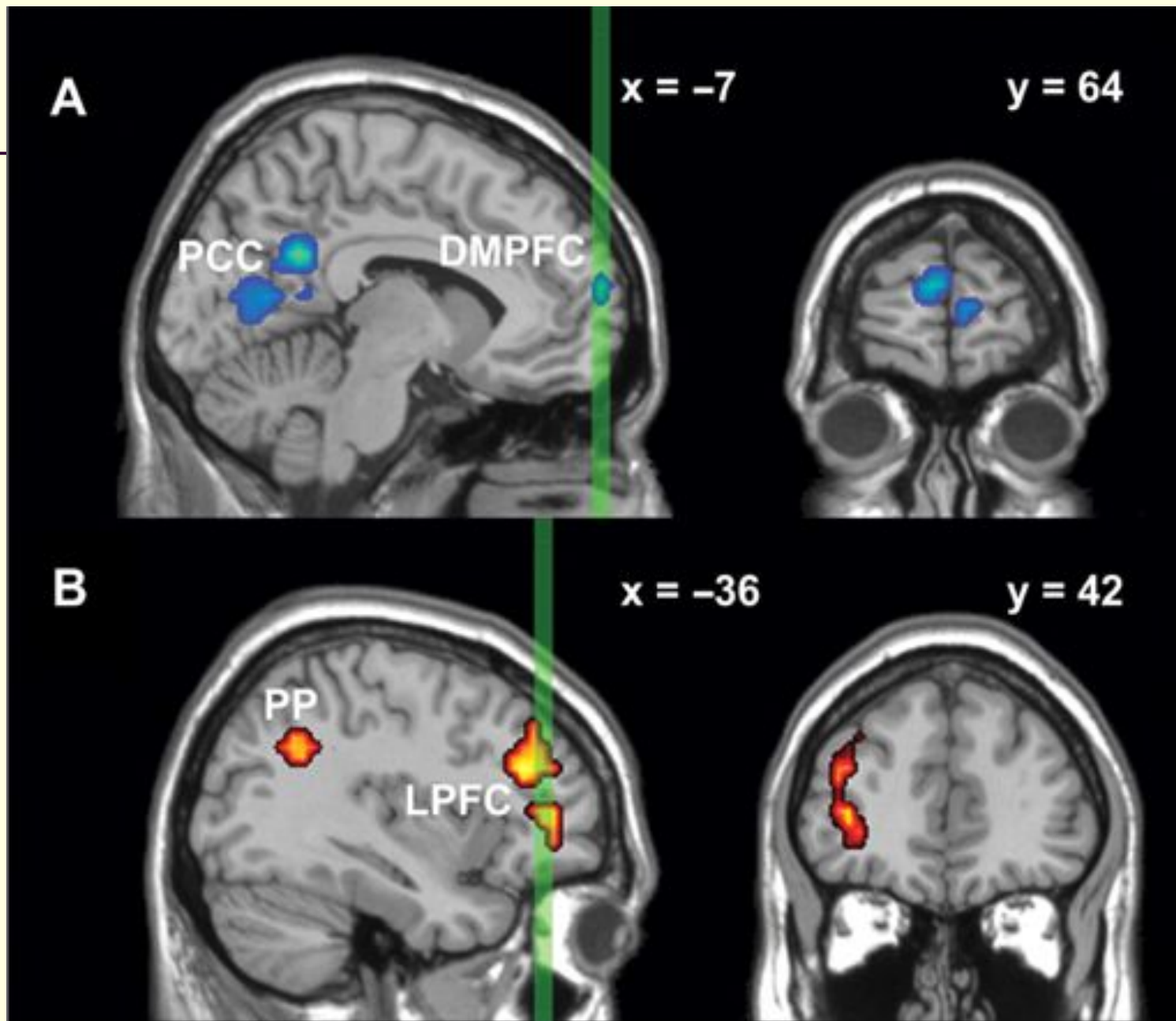
Mainly sensory
Little verbal activity
Concrete
Now-focused
Transient contents of mind
Nothing to do, nowhere to go
Sense of peace
Impersonal, 3rd person perspective
Uncertainty, not-knowing
Nonjudgmental
Mindful presence
Loosely connected experiences
Panoramic view
Minimal or no self-as-object
Minimal or no self-as-subject

Increased Dorsal MPFC Activation Related to Self-Referencing Thought

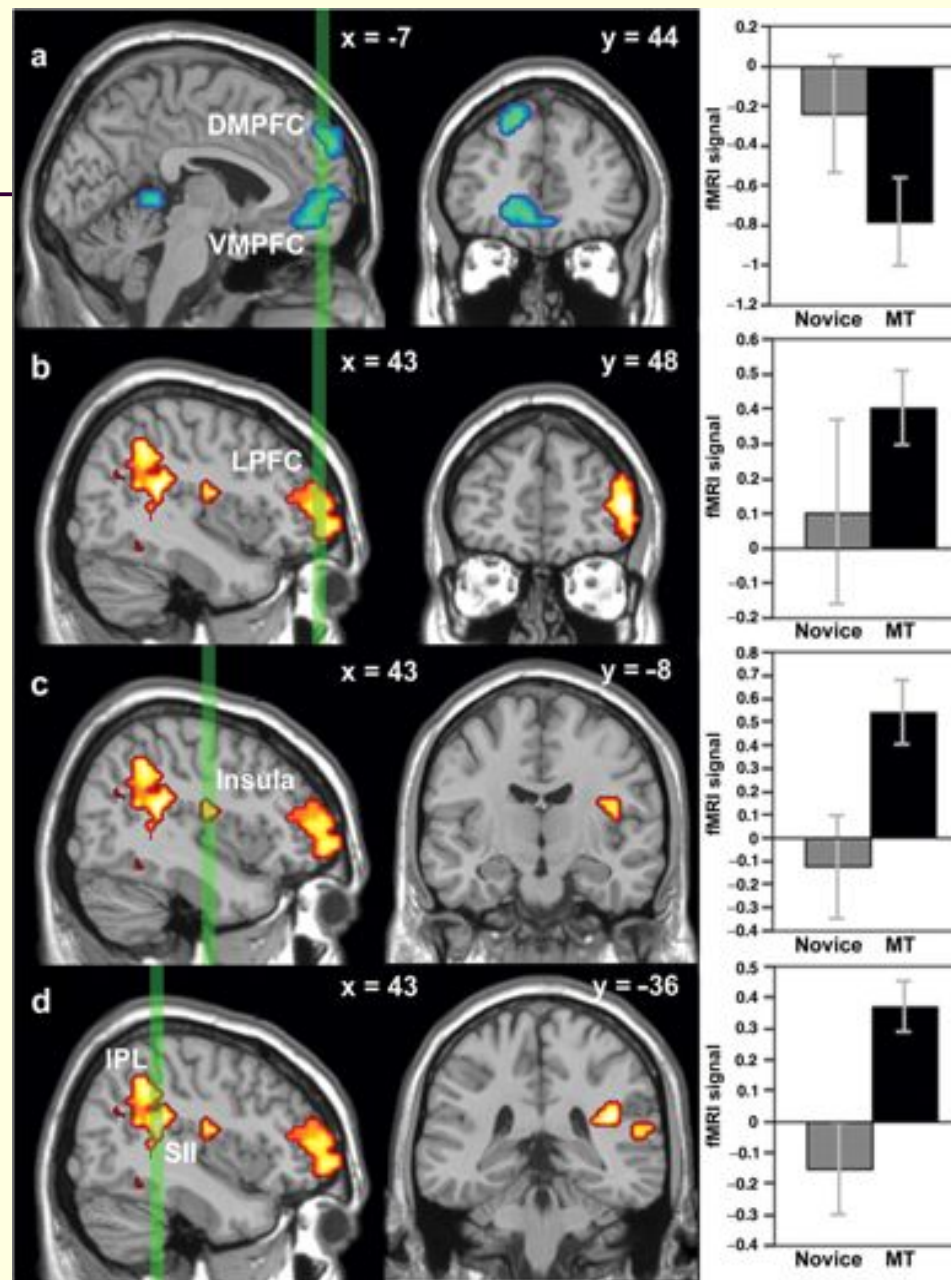


Gusnard D. A. et.al. PNAS 2001;98:4259-4264

Narrative (blue) and Experiential (red) conditions in the novice (pre MT) group



Narrative (blue) vs Experiential (red) conditions following 8 weeks of MT



Farb, et al. Soc Cogn Affect Neurosci 2007 2:313-322

Dual Modes

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“Only the Seen in the Seen . . .”

“Bahiya, you should train yourself thus.”

In reference to the seen, there will be only the seen. To the heard, only the heard. To the sensed, only the sensed. To the cognized, only the cognized.

When for you there will be only the seen in reference to the seen, only the heard in the heard, only the sensed in the sensed, only the cognized in the cognized, then, Bahiya, there's no you in that.

When there's no you in that, there's no you there. When there's no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two.

This, just this, is the end of all suffering.

The Buddha

Ways to Activate “Being” Mode

- Relax
- Focus on bare sensations and perceptions
- Open to liking, disengage from wanting

- Sense the body as a whole
- Take a panoramic, “bird’s-eye” view

- Engage “don’t-know mind”; release judgments
- Don’t try to connect mental contents together
- Let experience flow, staying here now

- Relax the sense of “I, me, and mine”

Gone Beyond Wanting

*Indeed, the sage who's fully quenched
Rests at ease in every way;
No sense desire adheres to him or her
Whose fires have cooled, deprived of fuel.*

*All attachments have been severed,
The heart's been led away from pain;
Tranquil, he or she rests with utmost ease.
The mind has found its way to peace.*

The Buddha

Ways to Activate “Being” Mode

- Relax
- Focus on bare sensations and perceptions
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- **Sense the body as a whole**
- **Take a panoramic, “bird’s-eye” view**

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Whole Body Awareness

- Sense the breath in one area (e.g., chest, upper lip)
- Sense the breath as a whole: one gestalt, percept
- Sense the body as a whole, a whole body breathing
- Sense experience as a whole: sensations, sounds, thoughts . . . all arising together as one unified thing
- It's natural for this sense of the whole to be present for a second or two, then crumble; just open up to it again and again.

Panoramic Awareness

- Recall a bird's-eye view (e.g., mountain, airplane)
- Be aware of sounds coming and going in an open space of awareness, without any edges: boundless
- Open to other contents of mind, coming and going like clouds moving across the sky.
- Pleasant or unpleasant, no matter: just more clouds
- No cloud ever harms or taints the sky.

*Trust in awareness, in being awake,
rather than in transient and unstable conditions.*

Ajahn Sumedho

*Be wisdom itself,
rather than a person who isn't wise
trying to become wise.*

*Trust in awareness, in being awake,
rather than in transient and unstable conditions.*

Ajahn Sumedho

Thank you

Be still

Listen to the stones of the wall

Be silent, they try

To speak your

Name.

Listen to the living walls.

Who are you?

Who

Are you? Whose

Silence are you?

Thomas Merton

Great Books

See www.RickHanson.net for other great books.

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See www.RickHanson.net for other scientific papers.

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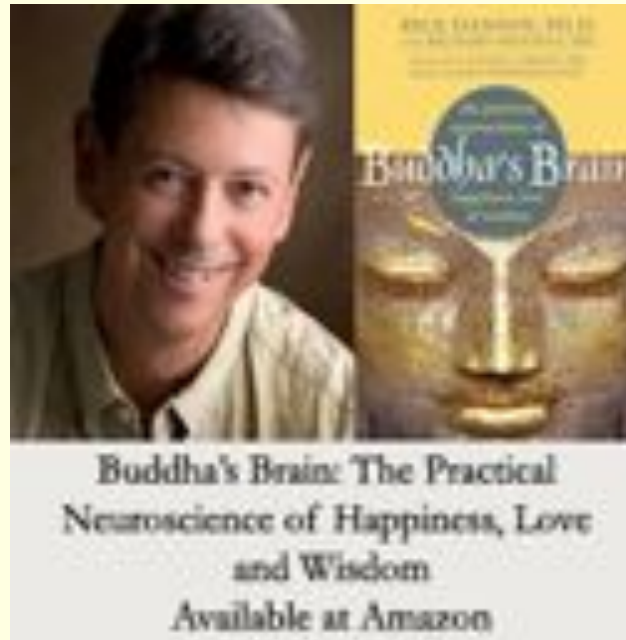
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