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Selfing

A Traveler's Guide to Bliss Brain

What is the experience of Bliss Brain like?

As I sit here in meditation this morning, I'm going to attempt to describe it, like a traveler reporting back to his friends from a distant country.

First, I close my eyes and go through the seven steps of EcoMeditation. I use acupressure tapping to release any stress in my body, and any mental or emotional obstacles to complete inner peace. I relax my tongue on the floor of my mouth. I breathe through my heart, and slow my breathing down to six-second inbreaths and outbreaths. I imagine my favorite beach and my favorite people playing on it, and I send a beam of heart energy to the scene. I picture a big empty space behind my eyes.

I can feel my body and I'm dimly aware of my surroundings. But most of my consciousness is focused on the experience I am having at the level of pure awareness and consciousness.

Waves of bliss are pouring through my brain and body. Occasionally, I shake or sway slightly as another wave of ecstasy hits. I focus intently on the space in the center of my being. Between my eyebrows, my forehead and skull tingle at the spot where the connection with this elevated state of consciousness anchors itself most strongly in my physical body.

It's easy to slip out of this place. Just one stray thought will do it. That thought will lead to another and, before I know it, my awareness has

slipped out of Bliss Brain. I find myself mentally composing a long email dealing with a problem in our latest marketing plan. *I know you want an opt-in page, but I think a full sales page would explain our program better.* Reliving an ethical dispute with a colleague. *Recommending a hip replacement for such an elderly patient was going too far.* Random scenes from the movie I watched last night flit through my mind. *How accurate was Chris Pine's Scottish accent when he played King Robert of Scotland?* Fragments of a bizarre dream pop into awareness—*wearing only a feather loincloth, I am frying eggs for Tony Robbins in the San Francisco airport.* Ideas about how to present the data in a scientific paper I am writing. *Should I be using a t-test or ANOVA?* That attack of arthritis earlier this week. *Will I need a painful knee replacement someday?* I'm past the deadline for a keynote speech I need to write. *Will the conference organizer be mad at me?* And a million other distractions.

Whenever that happens, I return my attention back to center. It's like tuning to a radio station. I can easily lose the signal and let the dial wander to a different station, perhaps one filled with anxiety and stress.

But I know what the center station feels like. I know the music it plays and how my body feels when I'm absorbed in it. Because I've been to the center so many times, I can usually find that station just a few minutes after I close my eyes.

So I tune in there again now. I feel an immediate expansiveness in my consciousness, a sense of connection with the entire universe. I feel a sense of welcome, as though I've come home. I'm living at the address in consciousness where perfect well-being is the only reality.

As I retune myself to center, another wave of bliss floods through my brain, mind, and body. I feel my consciousness lift out of my normal state, like a balloon rising in the wind, to meet and merge with a consciousness so vast and expansive that it has no end.

I know that this is the same intelligence that runs the universe in such perfect order. It has a sense of rightness to it that all the cells in my body respond to. Every cell knows it's come home, that it's connected to the universal consciousness with which my mind has merged. The local

reality field of my mind and body surrenders to union with the great nonlocal reality field of the universe.

There is no room in this consciousness for worry, doubt, or fear. The anxious thoughts with which I began the meditation session are now left far behind me, as the balloon soars high above the world of ordinary local reality.

My breath slows and deepens. Every breath is a connection with that great universal consciousness. Every inbreath flows out of that consciousness, while every outbreath flows into that consciousness. A warm feeling of well-being floods my body. Though the cool morning air felt chilly when I began the meditation, my body is now infused with the glow of connection.

As I center myself again and again, a portal of light opens up above my head. My awareness floats up through the portal. My heart is filled with a vast sense of calm.



2.1. Entering Bliss Brain.

There's a tingling pressure in the center of my forehead where the connection to the light tunnel is strongest. Angelic music echoes in my

brain, sound adding itself to light. My body sways spontaneously from side to side. Muscles twitch as huge jolts of energy surge through. Every sensation is washed away as the blissful light of oneness streams through my body. In the back of my mouth, I taste drops of sweet ambrosia.

Communing with Archetypes

As I ascend up through the portal, I find myself in a luminous place full of friends. These are archetypal presences, personifications of universal strands of human experience. From ancient times, humans have celebrated these archetypes in story, song, and legend. Different cultures know them by different names, but the energies of these gods, saints, and heroes are common to human consciousness.

I tune in to each of the archetypal energies I sense in this portal of light, as though I'm greeting old friends. I first feel the archetype of the warrior, the strong man, full of joy, strength, confidence, and courage. I think of him as Hercules.



2.2. Sensing the presence of the invisible council of archetypes.

Then the archetype of the healer. He looks like a wizened old monk, thousands of years old, silently exuding a sense of peace as vast as the cosmos itself.

Then the archetype of compassion, Kwan Yin, whose heart emanates unlimited acceptance for everyone and everything in the universe.

Then Mother Mary, the perfect mother, smiling and gracious, radiating the essence of love. The archetype of Joseph, the perfect father, filled with care, kindness, and integrity. The archetype of play and laughter, a dancing woman who spreads lightness and levity all around her.

Then the archetype of science, who I think of as Archimedes. He makes brilliant connections between ideas and concepts. The archetype of beauty. The archetype of abundance. The archetype of the prophet, freely sharing wisdom with others.

The archetype of love, whose presence I have felt since I was a child.

I enjoy the energy of each one in turn, feeling loved, guided, and protected as our energies blend. I feel grateful to have the presence of these archetypal energies in my life and the vast resource they represent—minds far greater than mine. This elevated state feels like the real reality. It feels more real to me than the material world.

Then in the middle of the group of archetypes, I notice an intense glistening silver-white vortex of light. I drift up into it. I find myself in a level of undifferentiated light. I look down at my mind, and it is flooded with that same white light. I am in Bliss Brain.

Everything dissolves into the light. There's no body, no me, no mind, no universe. Only the light. The light simply is. It has no beginning and no end. It stretches to infinity. It's all there is; there's nothing else in this real world of light other than the light. I lose myself in oneness with the light.

Seeking Answers from the Universe

When I am in this state, I sometimes bask in it for a long time. Other times I ask questions about issues I'm working on, such as a health, business, or relationship question.

The answers that flow from this elevated state are nothing like the solutions that come from my ordinary consciousness. They carry the

same brilliance as the place from which they originated. From this high perspective, problems are transformed into opportunities for growth and transformation.

In this vast expanse of consciousness, the thoughts I think are vast too. Because there is no fear in this place, the thoughts I think are fearless. This is a place of abundance, of creativity, of joy, of security, of magnificence. So every thought that springs from this place carries those characteristics. When I'm stuck on the ground of my ordinary state of consciousness, my thoughts are often fearful, negative, and repetitive. But when I soar into Bliss Brain, all those states of mind are left behind.

My mind receives images of gorgeous material things that may manifest, such as a business, a friendship, an opportunity, a product, a vehicle, an investment, a vacation. Even though these things are now only in unmanifest vibrational reality, they are likely to manifest eventually in material reality. Yet they already feel real and solid in vibrational reality.

Later, when I am back in ordinary consciousness, I'll be alert to any sign of the physical manifestation of those things. Perhaps I want to own a certain car and it feels completely right on the level of vibrational reality. Then back in ordinary consciousness, when I see that make of vehicle on the highway, I'll celebrate the feeling of owning it. It might be months, years, or decades till I actually do own that car in material reality, but I've been feeling the reality of ownership ever since I first touched it in vibrational reality.

At the moment, those wonderful things are floating in Bliss Brain. I feel completely unattached to them. They're interesting but not essential to my happiness. What is essential is the state of Bliss Brain itself. So I let the things drift through effortlessly and focus on the experience of Bliss Brain itself.

Even when I've used my meditation session to ask questions and receive answers from this level of consciousness so much wiser than my own normal state, I afterward return to simply basking in the beauty of that universal consciousness. It's like watching a perfect sunset, your thinking mind disabled by the surge of awe that arises within you. The

experience sends waves of ecstasy sweeping through my body, making me shudder with delight.

Anchored in Bliss

Sometimes I open my eyes during a meditation session and gaze softly at the room in front of me. Then I close them again. Once I'm anchored in bliss, it doesn't matter whether my eyes are open or closed. I can maintain this expansive state of awareness either way. My intention is to take this awareness into my workday after meditation. I don't want to think or act from anywhere else.

After a while, I look down again at my body sitting in the chair, my mind filled with the light. I realize I've been drifting, one with the light, for quite a while, basking in bliss. I'm aware of time again. My heart fills with joy and my eyes fill with tears, as I'm overwhelmed with gratitude. For my life, exactly the way it is. For every detail of what is. For everything that will happen in the future, no matter what it might be. I give thanks for all of it.

I open my eyes and look at the sunlight outside the room I'm meditating in. I'm aware of both time and space again. The forgotten cup of coffee in my hands is completely cold.

Tears of gratitude flow down my cheeks. I look at my cup. The words printed on it read: *Find Joy in the Journey*. After we moved into the new house that replaced the one destroyed by fire, I went on a hunt for mugs printed with inspirational words; the old hand-me-downs with captions like *Construction Equipment Dealer's Association* and *My Dang Dog Also Drinks from My Cup* didn't echo the energy of the meditative state.

I feel grateful for everything. My hands, with which I hold the coffee cup. My feet, with which I can walk. My breath, bringing life to my cells. My connection to the universe. The wonderful people in my life.

I close my eyes and I am immediately in the light once again. I open them and the light remains.

In a trance, I stand up and get a fresh cup of coffee.

My wife has woken up and she comes into the room to get her morning cup of coffee. We embrace wordlessly. I bury my face in her hair and am enraptured by her scent.

We gaze deeply into each other's eyes and say nothing as she sits down to meditate too. When I close my eyes again, I'm back in Bliss Brain.

Moving into the Day

I realize I have an appointment coming up in less than an hour and I need to prepare—to decide on today's priorities, do the most important things first, and then look at my inbox. To carry the energy of this first hour of meditation into the mundane affairs of the day. The process of communion with the universe is complete.

In my Bliss Brain state, I send love to everyone and everything I will encounter in my workday. All the amazing people on my work teams. I connect with everyone who's meditating at this same time anywhere in the world.

I tune in to all the people I'll see and meet and interact with in the future, through my blogs, teleclasses, live conferences, radio shows, podcasts, emails, social media, and in person. I feel a connection with everyone in my future and everyone in my past. I feel love flowing from my heart to all of them.

I give thanks for my life just the way it is and just the way it isn't. My heart swells with gratitude and joy. It's a privilege to be alive. I open my eyes and prepare to start my workday.

But I carry within me the indelible imprint of that time spent in communion with the infinite. I know that it will infuse my whole day, elevating my mind to a level at which it would never be capable of functioning unless I had centered myself at the start of the day.

The insights and ideas that arise in and after meditation are usually at a level of brilliance far above that of which I am capable in my ordinary waking state of consciousness. When I then start my day, I'm thinking

from this elevated perspective and making connections between ideas in a way that my ordinary consciousness cannot match.

I know I will find solutions, solve problems, and experience breakthroughs that I would never have had were my daily activities not infused with the wisdom, creativity, clarity, and joy of Bliss Brain.

This produces a fundamentally different life from one lived at the level of ordinary consciousness. I lived at that address for a long time before I discovered the ecstasy of connection with the infinite.

At that level of ordinary reality, I believed my fears were real. I believed that my limitations were objective facts. I believed that who I was today was determined by my past experiences. My mind was trapped in a small subset of possibilities.

Now that I know that the expansive state is possible, and that I can reach it in meditation every day, I see limitless possibilities. I'm no longer trapped in that small local mind that sees problems as real and limitations as facts. When I move into Bliss Brain, I see vistas of possibility in which those problems and limitations cease to exist. They are only real at that limited level of mind and they disappear when you consciously choose to ascend your awareness to the level of infinite nonlocal mind.



2.3. Bringing Bliss Brain back into everyday reality.

You then bring the solutions and possibilities of that level back down to your daily walk through life. Living this way every day is a completely different experience from living a life trapped in the confinement of local mind.

I meditate each morning—rarely missing a morning—so meditation is the anchor point of my days. When I look back on the many years behind me, all that seems to matter is each morning’s meditation. My time in the real world. My time in ecstasy. It’s the stitching that holds the whole fabric of life together. This feeling of expansive connection is the most important experience of my life, a light that illuminates every lesser experience.

Common Characteristics of Mystical Experience

If My experience in meditation is not unique; it’s common to meditators throughout history. A fourteenth-century Tibetan mystic, writing about his experience deep in meditation, described it as:

...a state of bare, transparent awareness;

Effortless and brilliantly vivid, a state of relaxed, rootless wisdom;

Fixation free and crystal clear, a state without the slightest reference point;

Spacious empty clarity, a state wide-open and unconfined; the senses unfettered...

The mystical experience isn’t the property of Buddhists or Catholics or Taoists or Hindus. It’s the common root of all religions. The great spiritual teachers entered these experiential states, and when they “came back from the mountaintop,” described them to their followers in the idiom of their culture.

Theologian Huston Smith, author of the best-selling textbook *The World’s Religions*, called mysticism the pinnacle of all religions. True believers may dispute the fine points of theology, but there is

no disagreement among the mystics, from whatever faith they hail, because they have shared the same primary experience. These experiences are spiritual rather than religious. Research shows that people often become much more spiritual after mystical breakthroughs, while interest in formal religious affiliation declines. Fourteenth century Sufi mystic Hafez exclaimed:

Am I a Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Buddhist, or a Jew? I do not know...for Truth has set fire to these words.

The adept no longer identifies with a particular religion, but with the source of all religions: the primary mystical experience. Nor with a theology, but with the source of all theology: intimate knowledge of the universe itself.

The first serious researcher to examine the characteristics of this ecstatic state was Andrew Greeley. In a study of 1,467 people, he drew parallels between mystical and ecstatic nonordinary states. Greeley found these elements common to transcendent experience:

1. Feeling of deep and profound peace
2. Certainty that all things will work out for the good
3. Sense of my own need to contribute to others
4. Conviction that love is at the center of everything
5. Sense of joy and laughter
6. An experience of great emotional intensity
7. Great increase in my understanding and knowledge
8. Sense of the unity of everything and my own part in it
9. Sense of new life or living in the world
10. Confidence in my own personal survival
11. Feeling that I couldn't possibly describe what was happening to me
12. The sense that all the universe is alive
13. The sensation that my personality had been taken over by something much more powerful than I am

As we escape the subjective self and rise above our suffering to view our experience objectively, we abandon the limitations of our local minds in the embrace of nonlocal consciousness.

Later researchers built on Greeley's initial findings. They found seven commonalities:

1. Unity/Completeness
2. Sacredness/Holiness
3. Presence of God
4. Emotional and Physical Reactions
5. Enlightenment and New Knowledge
6. Joy and Bliss
7. Extreme Sensory Stimulation and Hallucination

All mystics have similar experiences, whether they are Hindu *saddhus* begging as they wander the countryside, Buddhist monks isolating themselves in caves high in the Himalayas, or Christian nuns engaged in contemplative prayer. Harvard University's first professor of psychology, William James, after his own transcendent experiences, observed in 1902 that "our normal waking consciousness...is but one special type of consciousness, whilst all about it, parted from it by the filmiest of screens, there lie potential forms of consciousness entirely different." He said that no account of the universe would be complete without accounting for these states.

These altered states are more than subjective experiences. Science now shows that they are objective neurological states as well. In his book *How Enlightenment Changes Your Brain*, neuroscience researcher Andrew Newberg calls it this mystical ecstasy a "subjectively and neurologically real experience."

Falling from Grace

Meditation is called a *practice* for a reason: You practice it moment by moment.

Yesterday I had a perfect meditation, the one described above. Today is less successful. As soon as I close my eyes, a thought rushes in to disturb the peace. Then another, and another.

Did I leave the kettle in the kitchen plugged in after I made my tea? I suspect that my colleague is saying nasty things about me behind my back. Is today the day the dry cleaning is ready for pickup? Elizabeth Gilbert is a much better writer than I am. When I was arguing with my father-in-law about his retirement plan last week, I could have made a much better point. Is it a leap year? When is my next performance review? Did the kids hear us making love last night?

I worry about each thought. Then I release it and return to Bliss Brain. I smile.

Then another thought rushes in to take the place of the thought I just evicted. I frown. I start the eviction process all over again.

I become frustrated at the constant invasion of my peaceful meditative state by thoughts and worries. There are days that it never stops and I silently scream, “God, give me a lobotomy.”

Yet that frustration is just another worry to let go of. I love my mind because it’s so inquisitive and curious, and thinking and worrying is what the mind does. Wanting it to change is like standing on the beach and wanting the waves to stop washing in. It’s a futile request that can only lead to more unhappiness.

What I can do is keep returning, persistently and deliberately, to Bliss Brain. Maintaining positive energy and good humor despite the unceasing activity of the mind. This practice trains the brain in the experience of serenity and to reorient itself to peace when disturbed.

This practice of deliberately flipping the switch back to Bliss Brain may be more important than attaining Bliss Brain itself.

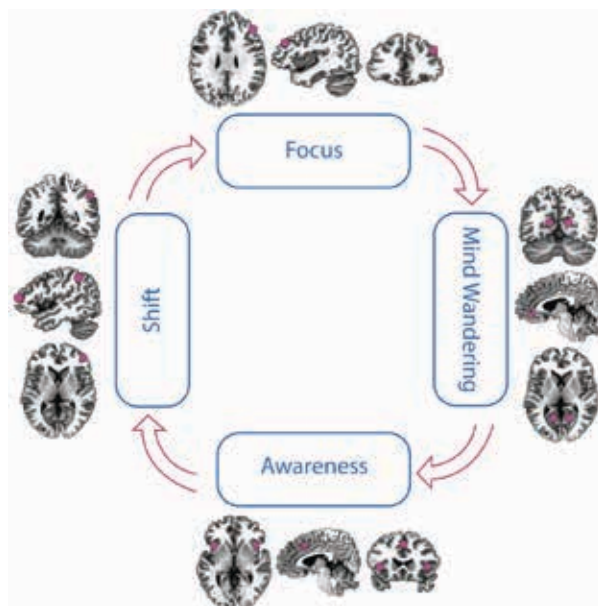
We’re accustomed to believing that what counts is attaining our goals. For the meditator, the goal could be holding a consistent state of bliss. Surely the saint who succeeds in attaining everlasting enlightenment is the pinnacle of perfection?

Perhaps not. Perhaps the poor sod who falls from grace, then picks himself up and clammers toward it again, only to fall back into the pit, is doing something important. The act of persistence may be more essential to the meditator than the permanent attainment of Bliss Brain. The true hero may be she who persists, not she who wins.

So in your meditation practice, fail happily. Fail an infinite number of times. Falling from ecstasy isn't the problem; it's part of the process. Choosing to elevate your state back to Bliss Brain even if you only succeed in maintaining it for a second is *the* crucial component of a successful meditation practice.

The Meditation Cycle

An important study performed at Emory University looked at the brain regions active during the falling stage as well as the meditation experience. The researchers found four distinct phases to the cycle. They called them Focus, Mind Wandering, Awareness, and Shift. Focus is when attention is centered in the meditative state. Then our minds start to



2.4. The meditation cycle. The meditator achieves Focus in Bliss Brain. Then drops into Mind Wandering. Then becomes aware that the mind is wandering (Awareness), and then consciously Shifts back into Bliss Brain.

wander. We become aware that the mind is wandering, then shift ourselves back into focus.

Seeing meditation as a cycle, rather than as a single ideal state, gives us a more realistic picture of what to expect in our meditation sessions. The Emory researchers emphasize that “Focus is inevitably interrupted by Mind Wandering (MW).” We then become aware that our attention has been hijacked, and practice Shift. We shift our attention back to Focus on the meditative state. And so the cycle goes, time after time.

I used to envy those lucky few people who’d broken through to the other side, who had attained a permanent state of bliss, eternal focus uninterrupted by mind wandering. Who’d achieved permanent connection to the universe.

Like the Buddha, after enlightenment, sitting under the Bodhi tree. Like Eckhart Tolle, who just “woke up” one day while sitting on a park bench, and stayed there ever after. Like Byron Katie, who woke up to transcendence in the midst of the deepest despair.

I used to compare them with plodders like myself, who after more than half a century of practice, still have to go through all four stages, getting sucked out of meditation by their wandering minds and then having to rescue themselves, time after time, even within a single hour’s meditation.

But now I understand that it’s the journey that counts, not the destination. That heroic journey back to focus, even when it has to be repeated countless times, is what tilts the scale toward bliss. St. Francis de Sales (1567–1622) wrote, “If the heart wanders or is distracted, bring it back to the point quite gently...and even if you did nothing during the whole of your hour but bring your heart back...though it went away every time you brought it back, your hour would be very well-employed.”

It’s like flipping a switch that’s programmed to be in the “off” position. You notice you’re in the dark, and you flip the switch to “on.” You’re in the light (Focus).

But then the switch flips back again, because that's its default position (Mind Wandering). You again notice you're in the dark (Awareness). So you flip the switch again (Shift). You're in the light again (Focus). Discover you're in the dark, and you regard it as a signal to flip the switch back on again.

Do this often enough, and the ratio of dark versus light then changes. In each meditation, you're gradually in Bliss Brain more than you're out. Each deliberate flip of the switch is a declaration to the universe that you're committed to being in the light. It isn't the length of time you're in the light that counts; it's the moments you're in the dark and flip the switch yet again.

The Cockroach Crawling over My Foot

After her divorce, Byron Katie sank into a severe depression. She became unable to leave the house and then unable even to leave her bedroom. Agoraphobic, paranoid, and suicidal, she turned to drugs and alcohol. She lived in this state for nearly a decade. Finally, through her insurance company, she ended up in a halfway house.

The other women in the house were afraid of her, so she was allowed to stay only on condition that she reside in the attic, where she slept on the floor. There, on the floor, she had a transcendent experience that changed her life completely.

“One morning I was asleep on the floor and I felt this thing crawl over my foot and I looked down and it was a cockroach,” she recalls. “I opened my eyes and what was born was not me...and the way I tell it is...she rose, she walked, she apparently talked. She was delighted. It is so ecstatic to be born and not born.”

Byron Katie was experiencing the oneness of the universe in the transcendent moment. “I call it love,” she says, “because I don't have another word. But just to see my hand in front of my face, or my foot, or the table, or anything, it's to see it for the first time. Here

are the words that I would use: It's a privilege beyond what can be told. It's self experiencing the mere image of itself...born in love."

From that moment on, her suffering ended. She walked out of the halfway house a changed person and the state of consciousness she experienced with the cockroach continues to this day. As she sums it up, "I discovered that when I believed my thoughts, I suffered, but that when I didn't believe them, I didn't suffer, and that this is true for every human being. Freedom is as simple as that. I found that suffering is optional. I found a joy within me that has never disappeared, not for a single moment. That joy is in everyone, always."

Byron Katie went on to become an international speaker and authored *Loving What Is: Four Questions That Can Change Your Life*, which describes "The Work," the self-inquiry method she developed as a result of her transcendent experience.

Racing Your Car's Engine in the Parking Lot

For decades, one of the mysteries of neuroscience has been the energy consumption rate of the brain. Though it represents only 2% of our body's mass, it consumes 20% of its energy. It consumes the same amount of energy whether engaged in a demanding task or at rest.

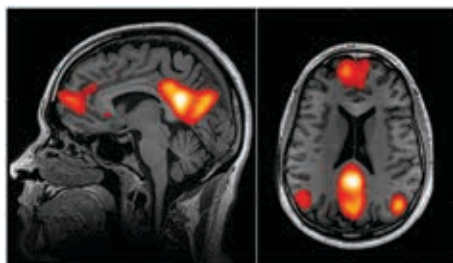
A thought-intensive activity like updating your resume, navigating a strange city at night, or composing a poem clearly requires the brain to rev up to maximum power. But when you're sitting in your garden in a lounge chair on a Sunday afternoon, reading the comics or staring at the flowers in the garden, your brain is still consuming 20% of your body's energy. MRI research shows that the brain's energy usage rarely varies more than 5% up or down in the course of a day.

It's like a car engine that keeps revving even when it's in idle. The Honda that Christine and I drove out of the fire has a six-cylinder engine with an output of 271 horsepower. When we're tearing down the expressway at 80 miles an hour, the tachometer tells us we're running at

2,000 revolutions per minute (RPM). But when we pull into the grocery store parking lot, put the transmission in park, and the engine is at idle, the engine is only turning over at 150 RPM, less than 10% of its peak output.

Your brain doesn't work that way. It's doing 2,000 RPM when you're in park. Why? That has long been one of the puzzles of neuroscience.

It turns out that when you're doing nothing, your brain is not doing the same. It's highly active. But it's running on autopilot, with a set of regions called the Default Mode Network (DMN) highly active. The DMN is what our brain defaults to when it's not engaged in a task like creating a spreadsheet or composing a letter to the boss or playing chess. When we're mentally at rest, our DMN kicks in, keeping our brains running at 2,000 RPM even though we're not doing any specific mental task.



2.6. Brain regions active in the Default Mode Network.

Marcus Raichle and the Dark Energy of the Brain

In the mid-1990s in a laboratory at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri, neurologist Marcus Raichle made an unanticipated discovery. It wasn't the focus of his research, but suddenly there it was. At the time, he didn't know what to make of it and merely filed away the lab results under a label he made up on the spot: medial mystery parietal area, or MMPA for short.

His accidental discovery led to him winning the Kavli Prize in neuroscience in 2014. This prestigious Norwegian prize is awarded

for “outstanding scientific work” in the fields of astrophysics, nanoscience, and neuroscience.

What was the mystery discovery? Raichle was conducting PET (positron emission tomography) scans on the brains of subjects engaged in concentrated mental activities and on those of a control group at rest. To his puzzlement, the brain scans of the control group showed marked activity in certain areas of the brain. These areas of the brain were not active in the subjects engaged in demanding mental tasks.

In describing this discovery, Raichle notes, “At some point in our work...I began to look at the resting state scans minus the task scans. What immediately caught my attention was the fact that regardless of the task under investigation, activity decreases were clearly present and almost always included the posterior cingulate and the adjacent precuneus.”

The posterior cingulate cortex (PCC), an area around the midline of the brain, is part of the limbic system, which is integral to memory and emotional processing. The precuneus is part of the parietal lobe and is also involved in memory. In summary, these parts shut down during a concentrated mental task and activate in a brain that is not doing anything in particular.

In 1997, Raichle and colleagues analyzed nine older studies and termed the collective regions of the brain that activated during a resting state and deactivated during attention-demanding tasks “the default mode network.” Raichle also calls it the “dark energy” of the brain, referencing the astrophysics term for the mysterious, unseen force that comprises two thirds of the energy in the universe. The dark energy of the brain is the energy consumed by the brain’s default mode, the brain’s background energy.

“It hadn’t occurred to anyone that the brain is actually just as busy when we relax as when we focus on difficult tasks,” observes

Raichle. “When we relax, however, the default mode network is the most active area of the brain.”

It jumps around between thoughts, emotions, images, and memories. Meditators call it “monkey mind,” after the way monkeys leap from tree to tree in the jungle. Why does the brain work this way? We don’t yet know, though Raichle theorizes that such activity may help the brain stay organized.

The Default Mode Network

The Emory researchers who identified the four phases of meditation found that when meditators slip out of focused attention and into mind wandering, the default mode network activates.

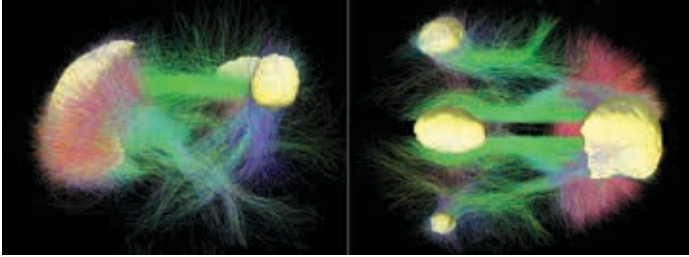
The wandering mind of the DMN has a “me” orientation, focusing on the self. It may flit from what’s going on at the moment, “Is that a mosquito buzzing?” to future worries, “I’m nervous about next week’s exam” to the past “I’m so mad at my brother Jim for calling me a sissy at my fifth birthday party.”

Disturbing memories are played and replayed. The brain defaults to what is bothering us, both recent and long-past events. These egocentric musings of the wandering mind form the fabric of our sense of self.

When you quiet your mind in meditation, you open up a big empty space in consciousness. For a few moments, the brain is quiet, and you feel inner peace. Then the engine starts revving. The DMN kicks in, bringing with it a cascade of worries and random thoughts. You’re doing 2,000 RPM in Park, but going nowhere.

And it gets worse. The DMN has a rich neural network connecting it with other brain regions. Through this, it busily starts recruiting other brain regions to go along with its whining self-absorption. It engages the brain’s CEO, the prefrontal cortex. This degrades executive functions like memory, attention, flexibility, inhibition, planning, and problem-solving.

The DMN also recruits the insula, a region that integrates information from other parts of the brain. It has special neurons triggered by emotions that that we feel toward to other people, such as resentment, embarrassment, lust, and contempt. We don't just think negative thoughts; we feel them emotionally too.



2.6A. Nerves (darker color) from the Default Mode Network (lighter color) reach out to communicate with many other parts of the brain.

At this stage, the meditator isn't just wallowing in a whirlwind of self-centered thoughts. The DMN has taken the brain's CEO hostage, while through the insula it starts re-playing all the slights, insults and disappointments we've experienced in our relationships. The quiet meditative space we experienced just a few moments before has been destroyed.

This drives meditators absolutely nuts. No sooner do they achieve nirvana, the still quiet place of Bliss Brain, than the DMN serves up a smorgasbord of self-absorbed fantasies, pulls us into negative emotional states, and drags the rest of the brain along behind it.

The DMN. Hmm...that acronym reminds me of something: "the DeMoN." The DMN is the demon that robs me of the inner peace I'm seeking through meditation.

Meditation traditions have evolved all kinds of techniques in an attempt to defeat the demon. Following the breath. Focusing on the third eye. Contemplating a sacred object. Saying a mantra. Chanting. Walking meditation. Mindfulness. Invoking the name of a saint. All these are efforts to discipline the wandering mind.

Many of these techniques have a neurological effect. They activate parts of the prefrontal cortex that govern attention. This pulls the mind

back to its meditative state. Research has shown that this regulatory neural connection is stronger in adept meditators than it is in novices. By refocusing your mind during meditation, you can strengthen the neurological connection that makes it easier to keep the demon from watching its favorite movie, the Me Show. Even three days of mindfulness practice can increase this connection.

While the demon is all about the self, meditation, especially loving-kindness meditation, is all about selflessness. All the mystical traditions of the world teach nonattachment to self as key to enlightenment. An area of the brain called the nucleus accumbens is part of the reward circuit regulating pleasure, addiction, and emotional attachment. Research shows that this area shrinks in long-time meditators. As they disentangle their attention circuits from the demon's endless "I, Me, Mine" attachment, they move into the transcendent state of Bliss Brain.

The Prince and the Demons

Buddhism has a story about prince Siddhartha, the future Buddha, when was on the eve of enlightenment. When Siddhartha began his mediation practice that evening, a demon came to distract him.

This was no ordinary demon; it was Devaputra Mara, king of the demons. "Mara" is the Sanskrit word for "demon." It refers to anything that obstructs the attainment of enlightenment.

Mara knew that if he could disturb Siddhartha's concentration, he would pull him off path to enlightenment.

Mara brought his whole gang, and they threw themselves enthusiastically into the task of knocking Siddhartha out of his single-minded focus. Some demons pitched arrows at him. Others shot fire. Yet others threw boulders, and when that failed to distract the prince, they picked up entire mountains and hurled them at him too.

Siddhartha's concentration remained on love. It turned the missiles into a rain of flowers.



2.7. The demon attempts to shake the single-minded focus of the prince.

Mara then tried a different tack. He took up the role of ring-master, and ran the ultimate Miss Universe contest. He conjured up a wide variety of beautiful women. They were of all shapes, sizes and colors. Black, yellow, red, white, short, tall, round, skinny; Mara offered Siddhartha any possible combination of pleasures.

The degree of Siddhartha's focus grew even deeper. He continued to meditate till dawn. In this state of perfect concentration, he forever removed the veil separating his local mind from nonlocal mind, and became a perfectly enlightened being.

The Me Show

Christianity has a story similar in theme to this one from Buddhism. On the verge of his maturity into public ministry, Jesus was tempted by the devil at the end of a solitary 40-day fast. He was hungry, and the devil suggested he turn the nearby stones to bread. Then the devil showed him "all the kingdoms of this world" and said they could all be his if Jesus would but bow down and worship him.

These wisdom stories from the world's great religions are more than ancient fables, or quaint superstition. They contain archetypal wisdom that illuminates core elements of the journey to enlightenment.

Notice the types of temptations the masters faced. The first attack by the devil plays on Jesus's hunger. Mara presented the Buddha with his fears. Everything that is going wrong. "The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune," as Shakespeare put it. That's the DMNs speciality: dredging up everything that's gone wrong in your past, or might go wrong in your future. That's the first way the demon tries to tempt you out of Bliss Brain.

Then the demon presented Buddha with every possible variant of sexual and sensual pleasure. The devil offered Jesus all the wonders of the world. That's another way the demon tries to distract us out of focus. All the good things we might experience. If presenting you with all your fears fails, then presenting you with all your desires might succeed.

There's a final way the demon can yank us out of single-minded attention to focus. The brains of meditating monks show enormous amplitudes of gamma brain waves - more on these later. Gamma is the wave of insight and integration. In Bliss Brain, we have flashes of unparalleled insight. It's a creative brainstorm. You get downloads of brilliant blog posts you could write, extraordinary art you could paint, astonishing leaps of imagination you might make, perfect circumstances you might create, beautiful changes you can make in your life.

Yet going down these rabbit holes can be as much of a distraction as your fears and desires. It's all about me. My safety, my pleasure, my body, my money, my health, my love life, my career. Of all the streaming video series our minds could tune into, the Me Show is the most compelling. It's the demon's ultimate weapon of mass distraction.

To reach and sustain Bliss Brain, it's essential to do what the Buddha and Jesus did: remain in one-pointed focus.

A Wandering Mind Is an Unhappy Mind

To track people's states of mind during their waking hours, two Harvard psychologists developed a smartphone app that contacted volunteers at random intervals. It asked them how happy they were, what they were doing at the time, and what they were thinking about. They could select from a menu of 22 common activities, like shopping, watching TV, walking, or having a meal. Eventually the researchers gathered some 250,000 pieces of information from 2,250 people.

What they found was that people spent about 47% of their time in negativity. The researchers wrote, "A human mind is a wandering mind, and a wandering mind is an unhappy mind."

When they were not focused on a task, people were focused on the self, immersed in their personal stories rather than the present moment. Their brains were working hard – but focused on the demon's unhappy stories. "The ability to think about what is not happening is a cognitive achievement that comes at an emotional cost," the researchers observed, concluding that "mind-wandering is an excellent predictor of people's happiness."



2.8. The mind defaults to wandering between miserable past memories and fearful future possibilities.

Mind wandering takes you out of the present, and into regrets about the past or worries about the future. The constant chatter of Monkey Mind took people's attention away from whatever activity they were engaged in—and out of joy.

They were least happy when they were doing one of three things. The first was tapping away on their personal computers, and the second one was work. No surprises there.

But the third one was surprising: resting. Why were they most unhappy when at rest? Without tasks to occupy their minds, the demon took over, recycling its endless unhappy absorption in self.

When they escaped the demon's fixation on past and present, they came into the present moment. That's when they were at their happiest. Happy present moment activities included exercising, making love, or chatting with a friend. Sex was the only activity in which the demon consumed less than 30% of their attention.

The activity they were doing made little difference to their level of happiness when compared with whether or not their minds were wandering. Mind wandering was more than twice as important in determining their degree of happiness than the activity. Only in the present could people find happiness.

Why Is Happiness So Fragile?

If Bliss Brain is so desirable and pleasurable, why is it so fragile? Why can our brains be distracted from happiness by the slightest hint of a thought? Why are they designed to pull us out of happiness when they receive the tiniest signal of an alternative state? Why is the demon's slightest whisper enough to drag us out of bliss?

One likely answer is that that's how our ancestors survived. Those that were the most responsive to danger lived. If your ancestor's brain had a genetic mutation that heard the rustle of the tiger in the grass a nanosecond earlier, he started running a moment sooner. Genes that paid close attention to threats conferred an enormous survival advantage.

People who were less responsive to potential threats died, and their genes were lost to the gene pool. Those who reacted to the smallest hint of danger survived, passing their paranoid genes to the next generation.

In contrast, happiness provided little or no survival value. Fail to notice a beautiful sunset, ignore the sound of children singing, walk by a rose bush without smelling the blooms? Nothing bad happens.

But miss the rustle of the tiger? That's fatal.

So thousands of generations of evolution have honed our ability to respond to even the most miniscule whisper of the remotest possibility of threat, and abandon happiness at the drop of a hat. Mother Nature cares greatly about your survival—and not at all about your happiness.

That's why the DMN defaults to worry, instead of to bliss. Mentally rehearsing future stuff that might just possibly hurt us, past stuff that definitely hurt us, and present stuff that might signal danger—all these are signs of a brain that is successfully practicing the strategies that ensured our ancestors' survival.

The goal of the mystical experience is to elevate you to enlightenment. The goal of the demon is to keep you safe. When you spend a few days at a meditation retreat trying to get happy, or read a book or take an online course, you can shift your state. But not for long. You're swimming against the tide of four billion years of evolution.

Selfing

That I-me-mine self is constructed largely in and by the brain's prefrontal cortex. This remarkable part of the brain allows us to do things that other animals cannot. We can compose music and calculate math. We have a sense of time that includes past and future, allowing us to delay gratification to meet our goals. We are able to contemplate the very nature of consciousness, using the brain to think about our thoughts.

Yet consciousness is always turned on. Whether we're focusing on a task or listening to the rambling of the demon, the engine is running at

2,000 RPM. There's no easy way of shutting off our thoughts, of getting outside of the self.

In his book *The Curse of Self*, psychologist Mark Leary of Duke University shows the many downsides of this perpetual self-awareness. He shows that it leads to many forms of suffering, including “depression, anxiety, anger, jealousy, and other negative emotions.” He concludes that self-awareness is “single-handedly responsible for many, if not most of the problems that human beings face as individuals and as a species.”

We can sum this up in one word: “selfing.”

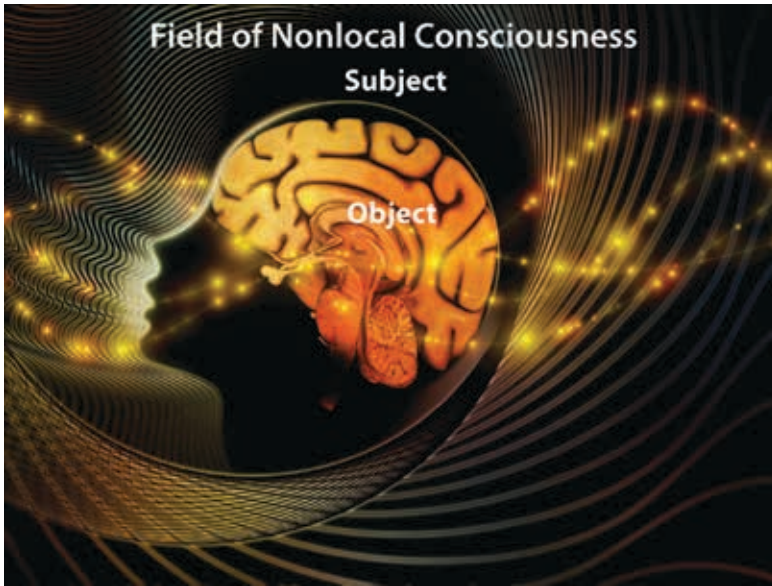
Meditation quiets that self-awareness and gives us relief from selfing. In experienced meditators, the “self” parts of the prefrontal cortex go offline. The jargon for this is “hypofrontality.” *Hypo* is the opposite of *hyper*, and *hypofrontality* means the shutting down of the brain's frontal lobes. The inner critic shuts up. We're free of the constant barrage of negative self-talk about “who I am” and “what I do” and “what other people think of me.” We quit selfing. This gives us a sense of identity beyond the suffering self and all the roles it plays.

Psychologist Robert Kegan is the former chair of adult development at Harvard University. He calls the transcendence of selfing the “subject-object shift.” In altered states, we get out of the subjective selves we normally think we are.

To be objective, you can't be the object you're contemplating. So when the brain enters a state of hypofrontality and we're no longer enmeshed in the local self, we gain perspective on it. We realize we're more than that. To realize it's an object we're observing, we have to step out of the suffering self. We see the demon from a distance and we comprehend the possibility of a identity that is vastly more than we have previously inhabited.

Kegan believes that making this jump is the most powerful way to facilitate personal transformation. He says that after it makes the subject-object shift, “the self is more about movement through different states of consciousness than about defending and identifying with any one form.” This ability to let go of the conditioned thinking that keeps us trapped in

the limited everyday self opens the door to an expansive nonlocal sense of self that encompasses our full potential.



2.9. Making the subject-object shift.

Some people even experience leaving their bodies. Neuroscientist Andrew Newberg describes a Sufi mystic who suddenly found himself looking down on his body from the outside. He notes that when you make the subject-object shift, this “reduces activity in the fear-and-worry centers of your brain, and as you watch your anxiety, you become less anxious” and more able to transcend the suffering self. While writing about an AIDS study, I came across a similar story told by a patient:

No-one Has a Monopoly on God

John was a gay, HIV-positive African-American man with a college education. One day, after transcending his preoccupation with his own suffering in order to help a drunk white man in distress, John had an out-of-body experience. Here’s how he describes it:

“I felt like I was floating over my body, and I’ll never forget this, as I was floating over my body, I looked down, it was like this shriv-

eled up prune, nothing but a prune, like an old dried skin. And my soul, my spirit was hovering over my body. Everything was so separated. I was just feeling like I was in different dimensions, I felt it in my body like a gush of wind blows.

“I remember saying to God, ‘God! I can’t die now, because I haven’t fulfilled my purpose,’ and, just as I said that, the spirit and the body, became one, it all collided, and I could feel this gush of wind and I was a whole person again.

“That was really a groundbreaking experience. Before becoming HIV-positive my faith was so fear based. I always wanted to feel I belonged somewhere, that I fit in, or that I was loved. What helped me to overcome the fear of God and the fear of change was that I realized that no one had a monopoly on God. I was able to begin to replace a lot of destructive behavior with a sort of spiritual desire. I think also what changed was my desire to get close to God, to love myself, and to really embrace unconditional love.”

This all happened in a moment, once John made the subject-object shift. Experiences of transcendence that allow us to see ourselves from above can completely reorder the fabric of our lives, producing complete changes in our behaviors and personalities. In Newberg’s words, “self-reflective observation...activates structures in the brain directly associated with Enlightenment and transformation.”

For centuries, Eastern religions have been telling us that it’s our egos that trap us in suffering. In the fifth century Indian adept Vashbhandu wrote, “So long as you grasp at the self, you stay bound to the world of suffering.” These spiritual traditions emphasize meditation, contemplation, altruistic service, and compassion as ways to escape the ego. Our emotions and thoughts become less “sticky” and “I, me, mine” “lose their self-hypnotic power.” That’s how we stop selfing.

Once we drop our identification with the ego-self enshrined in the prefrontal cortex and enter Bliss Brain, we make the subject-object shift.

We realize that if I'm not my thoughts and I'm the one thinking those thoughts, then who might I be?

This perspective takes us out of selfing and into the present moment. In the meditative present, we can connect with great nonlocal field of consciousness. Different traditions have different names for it; the Tao, the Anima Mundi, the universal mind, the all that is. We then see our local self as the object.

With this view from the mountaintop, we're able to perceive new possibilities of what we might become, this time from the perspective of oneness with the universe. Free of the drag of the ego, uncoupled from the chatter of the demon, the conditioned personalities we inherited from our history and past experiences no longer confine our sense of self. Like John, making the subject-object shift can allow us to rewrite our life script.

Getting Out of Your Head

Given the torment the demon produces for us, it's not surprising that we want to get "out of our heads." Besides meditation, humans have devised a great many options for doing this. In the book *Stealing Fire*, authors Steven Kottler and Jamie Wheal describe the various methods people use to tune out the incessant negative chatter of the DMN and break the spell of the local self. These include:

- Extreme sports like wingsuiting and kiteboarding
- Mind-altering street drugs like cocaine, marijuana and meth
- Mood-altering prescription drugs like Oxycontin and Adderall
- Therapy and self-help programs delivered both in-person and online
- Gambling
- Video games
- Immersive visual experiences like pornography, 3D and IMAX movies
- Social media
- Sex

- Group experiences like shamanic ceremonies, church revivals and Burning Man
- States of heightened creativity in the arts and sciences
- Mystical experiences
- Communal performance such as dance, drumming, music, and theater
- Immersive art
- Neurofeedback and biofeedback
- Alcohol and tobacco

While from the outside these look like completely different experiences, from the inside they have much in common. They all produce positive changes in our internal felt experience. They are all ways of getting out deactivating the demon by getting of our heads.

Whether it's a fire juggler at Burning Man, a monk meditating in a cave in the Himalayas, a wingsuiter flying through the Grand Canyon, a psychotherapy client having a breakthrough insight, an audience applauding the Three Tenors at the Metropolitan Opera, a computer coder seeing a vision of ones and zeros streaming through the Matrix after a caffeine-filled all-nighter, a channeler hearing the voice of an angel, a teenage raver carried away by techno dance music, a nuclear physicist flashing on an elegant new theory, an oxycontin addict ascending a high, or a worshipper having a vision of Mother Mary at Lourdes, these experiences of getting out of our heads have a common neurobiological profile. They quiet the demon and give us a break from our endlessly spiraling thoughts.

Kottler and Wheal have long studied the inner state of flow through their Flow Genome Project. They are experts on peak performance and advisors to many top-level companies and organizations. Their research focuses on how we can escape the tyranny of the demon and incubate that delicious state of flow.

To measure how desperately we want to escape the chatter inside our skulls, they calculate how many dollars we spend on attempts to get out of our ordinary selves. They call this sum the Altered States Economy.

Their astonishing conclusion is that the Altered States Economy is worth \$4 trillion per year in the United States alone; more than we spend on K-12 education, maternity care, and humanitarian aid—combined. That sum is greater than the size of the economy of India, or Russia, or the United Kingdom.

UCLA pharmacologist Ronald Siegel calls the need to intoxicate ourselves out of our ordinary states of consciousness as the “fourth drive” of humans and animals, and it can be as compelling as our three other drives: for food, water, and sex.

Meditation is just one of the techniques people use to escape the demon, but it has qualities that make it uniquely effective. It’s basically free; you can learn it online (see the resources at the end of this chapter), and it carries none of the financial penalties of gambling or consumables.

Meditation has no negative social consequences, unlike alcohol or drug use. Rather than the health penalties associated with addictive substances, it has positive side effects. It carries none of the risk of extreme sports. It’s portable and can be used flexibly at any time or place desired by the user.

The Four Characteristics of Ecstasy

While drugs like LSD and MDMA (ecstasy) can seem to offer a tempting shortcut to Bliss Brain, they have disadvantages that meditation does not. Twenty-five years of research into MDMA have shown that it can produce serious side effects, including impairments to cognitive function, sleep, memory, social intelligence, and problem-solving ability. None of the shortcuts offers a free ride.

Meditation produces major changes in brain function, minus all these hangovers. That’s why it’s been prized and practiced for millenia. Studies of Tibetan monks with tens of thousands of hours of practice show that

they're able to activate what Newberg calls "the enlightenment circuit," shut down the DMN, and give themselves inner peace. The jabbering demon that torments us goes dark, as most of the prefrontal cortex that creates it goes offline.



2.10. The enlightenment circuit associated with Bliss Brain. Brain regions include those involved with attention (striatum and dorsolateral prefrontal cortex), regulating stress and the DMN (ventromedial prefrontal cortex and limbic system), empathy (temporoparietal junction, anterior cingulate cortex, insula) and self-awareness (precuneus and medial prefrontal cortex).

In that altered state, the parts of the brain associated with happiness, compassion, and equanimity light up. Kottler and Wheal describe four experiential characteristics of these ecstatic states. They are:

- Selflessness
- Timelessness
- Effortlessness
- Richness

They summarize these four qualities with the acronym STER. The benefit of this characterization of altered states is that it's not linked to a philosophy, religion, cult, or school of thought. It focuses on the experiences common to transcendent states, rather than the paths through which people reach them.

Selflessness represents a letting go of the sense of I-me-mine and all the elements that keep us stuck in our suffering default local personalities.

Timelessness is coming into the present moment. That's the place where we're free of the regrets of the past as well as worries about the future. We're in the timeless now, the only place we can experience the state of flow.

There's no sense of effort there, so we relax. We feel connected to the universe and all living beings, our lives infused with a sense of richness. In this state we make connections between ideas, and the coordination between all the parts of our brains is enhanced.

These rich experiences feel deeply significant. Kottler and Wheel document the human drive for ecstasy as far back in time as the ancient Greeks, saying that Plato describes it as "an altered state where our normal waking consciousness vanishes completely, replaced by an intense euphoria and a power connection to a greater intelligence." Our English word "ecstasy" comes from the Greek *ekstasis*. It means getting outside (ex) the place where your consciousness usually stands (stasis).

That's Bliss Brain. When you quiet the demon, you open up space in consciousness for connection with the universe. This produces a rich experience in which time, space and effort fall away, and you merge with the rich infinity of nonlocal mind.

Winning the Experience Lottery

One of the magazines I see at airports is called the *Robb Report*. It's a magazine for the ultra-rich. It features glossy ads for \$75 million yachts, private jets, designer clothes, and exclusive jewelry. You're still selfing, but now you're doing it in the presidential penthouse suite.

When I flip through the magazine, I reflect on how many children in developing nations could get clean water for the cost of one of those yachts. How many veterans could get the six sessions of EFT that it takes to remediate PTSD. How many women could get shelter from domestic violence. How many near-extinct white rhinos could be protected from poachers.

Why do we want the yachts and jets? Why do we want that house on the hill or the flashy new car? Why do we want the glamorous girlfriend or the Rolex watch?

It's because we believe they will make us happy.

Yet we can become happy every day without them. Happiness is an experience, and we can give it to ourselves at no cost. All we have to do to lose ourselves in Bliss Brain is quit selfing. We can train ourselves to orient to this state at the start of every day.

Dancing on the Moonlit Beach

Christine and I recently stayed with some friends in Carmel, California, on the way to teaching a workshop at Esalen Institute. Carmel is a posh resort town by the ocean. After a heart-filled evening with conversation, food, and wine, we had a sound night's sleep.

I woke up early in the morning before everyone else. I focused my mind on letting go of the demon and embracing Bliss Brain. As I entered flow, I was drawn to step outside the house. I smiled up at the moon and the huge glowing ring around it.

I listened to the crash of the waves on the cliffs below. The ocean beckoned. I walked down the path to the beach.

The demon kept reminding me of my problems. "You didn't tell anyone you were leaving the house," it reminded me. "What if you fall off the cliff in the dark? It could be hours before anyone finds your broken body on the rocks below. What if Christine wakes up and starts worrying?" I breathe and try and stay focused on the champagne air.

The demon doesn't quit. "You left your deodorant at home," it babbles. "Where will you get more on this desolate stretch of road between Carmel and Esalen? You'll be teaching all those students and you'll stink!"

On and on and on the demon drones, serving up an unending supply of doom and gloom. As soon as I release each problem, the demon presents me with another one.

When I get to the beach, I take off my sandals and enjoy the sand squishing through my toes. I fill my mind with gratitude, pushing out the demon's persistent cries. Spontaneously, my body begins to do qigong postures. Awakenning the Qi. Ringing the Temple Gong. Rolling the Steel.



2.11. Dancing on the beach at dawn.

The demon is forgotten. Fully in the present, I relax into the embrace of Bliss Brain.

I begin to sing, chanting a hymn of gratitude. A rogue wave crashes against a nearby rock. The backwash surges along the cliff face to soak me to the waist. I laugh at the kiss of the saltwater. I begin to run along the beach, dodging seaweed and rocks in the moonlight.

Out of breath, I rest. I call in each archetypal guide and tune my mind to their frequency.

Half an hour later, still in bliss, I walk back up the cliff path to my friends' house. The dawn is breaking, orange hues of cloud streaking

the turquoise sky. My host greets me at the door with a cup of steaming coffee. I walk into the bedroom and my wife opens her eyes. We stare at each other for several minutes, our eyes glowing with love. The day has begun.

Such experiences are priceless. They make you happy in a way the yacht and the Rolex cannot. You can choose exstasis every day. You can start each day with gratitude and attunement to the universe no matter the distractions with which the demon tries to capture your mind.

Happiness is an equal-opportunity democracy. The bushman leading a subsistence Stone Age lifestyle in the Sahara can have it as surely as a Fortune 500 CEO. You can own the \$75 million yacht and be much less happy than the dripping fool dancing on the moonlit beach for free. You can have nothing except soaked shorts and feel deliriously happy, immersed in Bliss Brain and free of the incessant chatter of the DMN.

It's experience that has value, not possessions. We desire possessions because we think they'll make us happier, but extensive research shows that once our basic survival needs are met, increased possessions don't boost happiness levels.

Meditation gives us the option of going straight to happiness and skipping the intermediate step of possessions. Acquiring them takes a lot of work and time, and all that effort can take us out of flow. We can spend a 40-year career amassing the possessions and money that we believe will give us happiness in retirement. Skipping the amassing stage and going straight to bliss gives us the end goal at the beginning. We win the gold medal before the contest even begins. Play doesn't happen in an imaginary future in which our lives our perfect. Play happens now.

We can become billionaires of happy experiences, the bank vaults of our minds overflowing with joy. That's the only currency that counts. We've then acquired the end state without going through the intermediate state of getting stuff. We've loaded the dice, so that any and every roll produces bliss.

Why not live like that every day?

Deepening Practices

Here are practices you can do this week to integrate the information in this chapter into your life:

1. Each morning, listen to the free 15 minute meditation on letting go of selfing that you'll find in the Extended Play Resources section below.
2. Name your demon. Give it a funny personal name, or ask it what its name is and write down the answer. One woman christened hers "Sticky." Another, "Yuggo."
3. To make the subject-object shift, whenever you find your mind wandering during meditation, simply thank your DMN by name (e.g. "Thanks, Yuggo") and then move your attention back to focus.
4. As a way of becoming mindful, enroll in the Harvard smartphone app—wandering mind study using the link below.
5. Spend time in nature at least three times this week.
6. In your new personal journal, write down the insights you have this week.

Extended Play Resources

Available free at BlissBrain.net/2

Video of Qigong routine.

Enrollment link to the Harvard wandering mind app study.

Meditation on letting go of self.

Video of the how the DMN works.

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