



# mindset

BY KAREN STEWART, MA

## hope for the new year!

“There are two ways to live your life—one is as though nothing is a miracle, the other is as though everything is a miracle.”  
Albert Einstein

Something is happening that to me seems nothing short of miraculous! A new field of scientific study is developing at the intersection of psychology, neurology, and contemplative practice (spirituality). Scientists are beginning to appreciate and understand the nature of humankind and the incredible interconnectedness of life.

Using MRI technology scientists have begun to study what happens in the brain during mental states that are associated with happiness and well-being. They are beginning to understand the biological underpinnings of what the Buddha discovered more than 2,000 years ago and what mystics in all religions have always known. Our true nature is:

*“both a refuge and a resource for the sometimes difficult work of psychological growth and spiritual practice. It’s a remarkable fact that the people who have gone the very deepest into the mind—the sages and saints of every religious tradition—all say essentially the same thing: your fundamental nature is pure, conscious, peaceful, radiant, loving and wise and it is joined in mysterious ways with the ultimate underpinning of reality, by whatever name we give That. Although your true nature may be hidden momentarily by stress and worry, anger and unfulfilled longings, it still continues to exist. Knowing this can be a great comfort.”*

Rick Hanson, PhD, with Richard Mendius, MD, *Buddha’s Brain, The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love and Wisdom*. New Harbinger Publications, 2009, p. 15

Life holds unavoidable physical and emotional pain (illness, accidents, loss of loved ones, etc). If we can respond to the pain from our true nature with acceptance and compassion we reduce our suffering considerably. Unfortunately we often get derailed from our true nature and caught up in three very unhelpful survival strategies:

- The belief that we are separate independent entities when in fact we are all connected.
- The attempt to create stability in an ever-changing world.
- The desire to cling to pleasurable experiences and to avoid negative experiences, which is ultimately impossible.

*Buddha’s Brain*, p. 12

Our feelings of separateness and independence often lead to feelings of isolation and in the worst case of seeing others as enemies and competitors, rather than allies and sources of support. We are in fact wired for connection with other humans, animals and the world around us.

Hanson states that the separation between our body and the world is “like a picket fence” and the separation between our mind and the world is “like a line painted on a sidewalk” (*Buddha’s Brain*, p. 27).

In an article in the January/February, 2010 issue of *Psychotherapy Networker*, John Arden and Lloyd Linford have this to say about the connections between people:

*“We now know from neuroscience and attachment research that interpersonal relationships profoundly affect the physical structures and processes of the brain. Indeed, neuroscience tells us that our brains are exquisitely social in nature. As a species, we’re constantly getting into each other’s heads, affecting each other’s moods and emotions, and rewiring each other’s neural networks.”* Therapy works primarily as a nervous-system-to-nervous-system regulator like mother to child, mate-to-mate, friend to friend that helps clients ramp down their own brains’ arousal levels and reactivity as well as activate their neural capacity for regulating their own emotions. (p.29 , my italics)

Health and healing come from:

- Recognizing that we are all connected and establishing healthy compassionate loving relationships.
- Accepting that the nature of life is change and embracing change in a way that encourages growth and development.
- Appreciating the pleasurable joyful times and developing inner and outer resources that will help us face the difficult times with courage and grace.

Hanson states that the three major functions of the brain are regulation, learning and selection (p.15). In *Buddha’s Brain* he describes a way to activate those functions in a way that increases our ability to be mindfully aware, regulate our thoughts, feelings and actions, and make wise choices. He states: “As a result, over time you’ll feel more connected with everything, more serene about how all things change and end, and more able to meet pleasure and pain without grasping after the one and struggling with the other” (p. 13-14).

Understanding and appreciating our true nature and the connection of all life has the power to reshape our world. Life is sacred and in the words of Albert Einstein:

*“The life of the individual has meaning only insofar as it aids in making the life of every living thing nobler and more beautiful. Life is sacred, that is to say, it is the supreme value to which all other values are subordinate.”* 🌱🌱

Karen Stewart, MA, and David Stewart, PhD, are psychologists who work with individuals, couples, groups, and organizations in their Durham practice at Suite 220 at 811 Ninth Street in Durham. Reach them at (919) 286-5051. Web address: [www.stewartpsychologists.com](http://www.stewartpsychologists.com)