



### Interview with Dr. Rick Hanson

**Rick Hanson, PhD** is a neuropsychologist and New York Times best-selling author. Founder of the Wellspring Institute for Neuroscience and Contemplative Wisdom. He's been an invited speaker at Oxford, Sanford, and Harvard, and taught in meditation centers worldwide.

**Dr Elise Bialylew:** I'd like to start with a personal question which is, you're a meditator and I'd like to know why it is that you meditate.

**Dr. Rick Hanson:** That's a great question. There are multiple reasons I guess. One is that, it's a way to come home. To come home to what it feels like at the core of me and come home really to sort of an ongoing sense of being, you know, a human "be-ing". That's really important especially at a time that I think so much of modern life tends to drive us away from home, so we start to accumulate the burden of an ongoing sense of inner homelessness. That's one reason.

A second reason is that based on my interest in the mind, meditation is a very powerful way to get to know oneself and increase self-awareness and as you increase self-awareness you start being able to know yourself better, own all of who you are more, which is good in its own right and you get more insight in your own reactivity and patterns of reaction... and self-knowledge.

I think of being in that meditative state as purifying the toxins or the heaviness out of your mind. As you are in that open mind space stuff bubbles up, you're aware of it, and then the bubbles pop and it doesn't afflict you so much.

I think the third reason, the last reason is for cultivating liberating insight. A deepening felt insight into mind itself. Not so much the contents of mind, but the process of mind. This ongoing streaming process. In that liberating insight you recognize the transience of everything, the automaticity of everything and the selflessness of everything. Increasingly, there's a release from ordinary processes of getting identified with bits and pieces of the mind stream, and increasingly an opening out, at least for me, into a sense of all-ness. Maybe even edging into a sense of that which is unconditioned always prior to conditioned emergence.

**Dr Elise Bialylew:** Thank you, I really love the concept of inner homelessness and the idea of coming home. Thanks. Just moving onto your work now. You've written many books and there's many brilliant concepts in there that I hope to be able to touch on and inspire the

listeners to follow up in more detail through your books. Something that you write about, which is a common theme in this area is “experience-dependent neuroplasticity”. I wonder if you could sort of break that down for the listeners in a way that’s a little bit more digestible and perhaps give us some example of what you mean by this.

**Dr. Rick Hanson:** Yeah, the basic idea is that, if we learn anything, in other words if we learned to walk instead of crawl or we acquire personal memories or we learn how to navigate tricky relationship issues or we learn how to be more skillful with our emotional reactions - any kind of learning involves changes in brain (neural) structure and function. The two go together. So the other way to look at it is that our thoughts and our feelings, what’s streaming through our consciousness moment to moment is continuously sculpting our brain - that’s what scientists mean by experience-dependent neuroplasticity and the take away for me is to realize that by understanding a little bit, you don’t have to become a new fancy neuroscientist, but a little bit of understanding about how the brain works gives you the power to start using your mind to change your brain to stimulate and therefore strengthen the neuro substrates, the neuro circuits of happiness, love and wisdom because if you stimulate them you strengthen them because of this famous saying, “Neurons that fire together are wired together”.

So by understanding a little about your brain and the circuits that support the love and the inner peace and the determination and the strength of heart that you want to cultivate, and the happiness and gratitude, etc. that you want to cultivate in yourself. By understanding a little bit about how the brain works in those regards you can deliberately use your mind to stimulate and thereby strengthen those neuro substrates which will then help your mind for the better. And that’s what self-directed neuroplasticity is.

**Dr Elise Bialylew:** Okay, fantastic. So I want to dig deeper now and move into how we can harness this to create, and as your book called “to hard wire happiness”. Would you like to share any specific techniques or practices that come to mind from your book?

**Dr. Rick Hanson:** Sure, I’ve been thinking lately about this quote from George Orwell the author of 1984. He wrote, “To see what is in front of one’s nose requires a constant effort.” Right? I think that’s so interesting because what’s been in front of our nose in psychology, neuropsychology is the understanding that changing the brain for the better, any kind of learning, is a two stage process in which, activated mental states must get installed as lasting traits. From states to traits is an important point here, positive traits like happiness or gratitude or feeling loved or feeling both assertive and kind as a combination or having compassion for others or being determined to succeed at work or being more skillful with other people. Any kind of positive trait starts with a positive state. Almost all positive traits start with a positive state. There’s a few positive traits that require a negative state to begin with but usually we build positive traits, inner strengths including happiness from internalizing moment after

moment after moment of positive states. That's been under our nose all along except that it has radical implications. So we have to start with some kind of positive state of mind.

Happiness is way underrated it's so easy to poo poo any kind of positive moment, you know, gratitude, love, compassion, self-confidence, feeling like you've accomplished something, feeling like you're worth something. It's so easy to dismiss and poo poo that but those experiences are the beginning of building up the inner strengths so that we can be more resilient, more moral, more virtuous and also happier people which also of course affects physical health long term. So we start with positive states, we activate it but if we don't install it in the brain, it's wasted on the brain. It's momentarily pleasant, better than a stick in the eye, but it has no lasting value, there's no learning, there's no learning curve, you know, it's just flat.

***That's why taking the extra 10-20 seconds to stay with the experience, to try to feel it in the body, to open up to it, to have it be as rich as possible is key to turning positive mental states into lasting positive mental traits and that's the gist of a lot of what my book's about and a lot of my work which gets into the detail of that. So the take away point for a person in everyday life is, you know, half a dozen times a day when you're already having some ordinary authentic positive experience, a moment of gratitude, a feeling of relief, a sense of someone being friendly towards you, a sense of accomplishment of finishing something, maybe some kind of meditative experience or insight, walking outside and seeing the beauty of the world, whatever it might be at least a half dozen times a day don't waste that positive experience. Take the extra 10, 20, 30 seconds to give it to yourself like a beautiful gift. Opening yourself to it, sustaining your mindfulness on the experience so you stay with it rather than getting distracted. Having a warmth toward yourself so you allow yourself to receive this beautiful positive experience so that it actually becomes a part of you and any single time you do that won't change your life but the gradual accumulation of these little moments will gradually change your brain for the better.*** Weaving these positive experiences into the fabric of your brain and therefore your life.

**Dr Elise Bialylew:** So this idea of really not just letting good, pleasant things pass by but actually marking them intentionally and taking them in.

**Dr. Rick Hanson:** Yeah, absolutely. If we don't do that they have no lasting value, they may as well not have happened and this is also where we can talk about the negativity bias of the brain.

**Dr Elise Bialylew:** That was going to be my next question. Which is fascinating. Such interesting area...I would really love the listeners to hear this from you.

**Dr. Rick Hanson:** Yeah! So there's this general point that's been under our nose. I didn't invent this, right? I merely highlighted it, I've become quite passionate in advocating for the

importance of installation, really helping passing mental states become lasting positive traits right. But this point gets sharpened when you take into account the brain's negativity bias which makes it good at learning from bad experiences but relatively bad at learning from good ones. So the reason for the negativity bias, I'll give you some examples of it, so ten things happen in a day with someone you work with, live with. Nine of those things are positive, one's negative. What's the one you tend to think about when you're falling asleep? The negative one right? Lots of study show that the brain reacts more to negative stimuli than positive stimuli. Then equally we remember negative information about other people more than we remember positive information - one episode that's upsetting in a relationship has about as much impact as five positive interactions so we need to have at least 5:1 positive to negative ratio interactions in our important relationships – so in other words we are more motivated to avoid pain than to approach pleasure generally speaking. You know the negativity bias shows up lots of ways. And the one way it really shows up is around converting states to traits. Once burned, twice shot. If you ever survive that attack in the wild, the negative event in the wild, you better remember because you may never get a second chance to avoid it. But if in the wild you failed to get that good thing, eh, you'll have a chance tomorrow. That's the evolutionary basis for the negativity bias which is then hard wired into the human nervous system over 600 million years of evolution of the nervous system. ***The way I put it to kind of sum it up, the brain is a Velcro for bad experiences but like Teflon for positive ones.*** And that's Mother Nature's plan, a fantastic way to keep creatures alive to pass on their genes to pass on genes under harsh conditions.

***But in the typical conditions that most people live in today, certainly in the developed parts of the world, with some tragic and unfortunate exceptions, for most people this blueprint, this stone age brain, is no longer a design feature, it's more like a design bug. So if we intentionally tilt toward the positive we just level the playing field.***

**Dr Elise Bialylew:** So powerful, such a powerful concept. The idea that our default is this negative bias and so therefore it really invites us to be more active to as you said, level out the playing field.

**Dr. Rick Hanson:** Yeah! A lot has just motivated me around this, it's just kind of my own personality, I was very determined, independent, "don't mess with me" kind of guy, and I begin to realize that what was primarily controlling me and messing with me was both Mother Nature's programming in my head and its consequences over time. So what has motivated me a lot around all this is to really appreciate the power of the negativity bias and this ongoing process of structure building in the brain.

A traditional saying in Buddhism, in my own background of contemporary practice, is that the ***mind takes its shape from whatever it repeatedly rests upon.*** That's a cautionary tale. The

modern update would be the brain takes its shape from whatever the mind repeatedly rests upon with the understanding that the brain is very vulnerable if the mind repeatedly rests on negativity so people are caught in loops of ruminating negatively or being worried or criticizing themselves, criticizing others, or that kind of grinding case making process in the mind, “how can you do that to me”, “I’m gonna say this next time we meet” “I’m gonna write that email to you that really straightens you out” you know? Hey! A little bit of that goes a long way but if we’re doing that past the point that’s valuable, especially if it’s negative, we’re not learning anything new, we’re doing laps around a track in hell because of experience dependent neuroplasticity digging that track deeper every time we go around it since neurons that fire together, wire together as well.

**Dr Elise Bialylew:** On that point, what just came up for me which I would like to ask you about is with mindfulness meditation practice it’s about being with what comes up in the present moment with openness, curiosity, kindness, compassion and sometimes there are spirals that come up in the mind, so how do you see that practice in not perpetuating these neural ruts?

**Dr. Rick Hanson:** It’s a very deep and a very important question and I’ll kind of answer it in two parts okay? So part one is, you know, as someone who has been trained, I started meditating since 1974 and I teach meditation around the world and have great respect for meditation and the mindfulness tradition. When you’re dis-identified from what’s arising in your mind, you’re stepping back from it, it’s as if instead of being glued to the screen in a movie you’re twenty rows back with popcorn looking at it going, “Wow, I’m so mad at my boyfriend.” “Whao, so much anger”, “Wow that just pulls up my whole history with my father, isn’t that interesting”, you know there you are, you’re witnessing it or there it is the body sensations. That’s okay because fundamentally you’re actually associating a detached open spacious perspective with some related positive qualities to that negative material. You’re linking open spacious detached awareness to the negative material so gradually that open spacious accepting awareness starts to associate with the negative material. Neurons that fire together wire together, and heal. So that’s great. That’s of course different from being identified with it, right? That’s my first point.

The second point is that in addition to the power of that detached perspective I think there are two major ways to engage the mind. We need to let go of what’s negative, abandon it, prevent it, stop it from arising in the first place and in particular we need to grow the positive. ***So we have three great ways to engage the mind. One we deal with it, two we reduce or release the negative or prevent it, and three we grow, preserve and increase the positive. If the mind were like a garden, we can witness it or pull weeds and plant flowers. Let be, let go, let in.. all are important.*** My personal view as someone involved in mindfulness, psychology and Buddhism for a long time, is that I think that mindfulness has gotten overrated as the entirety of the spiritual path or the entirety of what people need to do for personal growth or just functioning in everyday life. I think mindfulness is primary, because you can’t always let go of

the negative and you can't always grow the positive but you can always be with what's there. With that said, even as a great fan of mindfulness as the Buddha allocated the other seven elements of the eightfold path to various forms of engaged fruitful practice with the mind to cultivate wise view, wise intention and one is actually called wise effort which is basically very explicitly about, reducing the negative pulling weeds and growing the positive, you know, planting flowers in the garden of the mind. ***So I think all are important and in fact to be able to sustain mindfulness to be able to grow resources inside yourself so you can be with what's there without getting so hijacked by it. So you have the capacity to observe it, to tolerate your distress, to feel your inner allies with you. There's a saying in Alcoholics Anonymous: "The mind is a dangerous neighborhood never go in alone."*** We need to internalize these resources by cultivating them. By taking in the good again, and again, and again. Installing those positive experiences of being cared about or installing calm and relaxation inside so we can tolerate our upsetting experiences, installing insight and understanding as to why it's important to be mindfully present with our feelings, to feel the painful feelings rather than push them away. Also install frankly, steadiness of mind, that capacity to really pay attention to what's present without getting caught up in it. You know, so wise effort supports wise mindfulness and wise mindfulness support wise effort. Another way I put it is the great bird of practice which has two wings, being with and working with. And like any bird, it needs two wings to fly.

**Dr Elise Bialylew:** Thank you, I'd love to hear your perspective on the topic of stress and the neurobiology of stress and how meditation might support that.

**Dr. Rick Hanson:** Alright, great question.

First, I think it's useful to distinguish between stressors and stress or more exactly, challenges and impacts of stress. Think of ordinary examples in everyday life, there are certain situations some people find very stressful like public speaking whereas other people find them very relaxed. I think it's important to distinguish challenges and stress and you appreciate that what it's really about is installing shock absorbers inside our mind-brain system so that when challenges land we're no longer so rattled by them.

So how do we grow those shock absorbers? Well, you're totally right, we have this negativity bias again, this hyperactive, hyper vigilant, threat response system that's embedded in the brain based essentially in sub-cortical systems that have to do with amygdala, which is the alarm bell of the brain and the hippocampus which really remembers things especially the negative experiences.

So meditation, now zeroing on your point, helps us with this stress machinery in lots of ways. It helps us deal with acute situations and it also helps us build up that inner shock absorber so we're not so affected by challenges tomorrow and next week and next year. Over the long haul

what a repeated practice of meditation does is that it repeatedly gives you experiences of relaxation and ease. Those get increasingly installed, increasingly internalized in yourself so you have a more chance of being chill, you know, when other people around you are getting activated. Another nice thing about meditation as well, is it gives you relaxation and ease, it strengthens your sense of integration, you know, all of you. Very often what happens is that when we're triggered an event has activated, a kind of module inside us often leftover from childhood or very painful events in adulthood and it's just a part of us it's like a little sub-personality or a little program inside us, and then we're hijacked, you know, weeeee..., we're off and running. But with meditation, studies show that it increases over time what are called gamma ranged brain waves which are involved with a global sense on integration and wholeness so as you develop more that sense of self knowledge and wholeness and integration all together, you're less vulnerable to getting hijacked.

I think that honestly, the research now, to finish up here to sum up, the research on the physical health benefits of meditative practices or related mindfulness based interventions of various kinds and the research on the mental health benefits of meditation or related mindfulness practices is so robust at this point and so powerful frankly in comparison to many medication interventions, that if the large pharmaceutical companies could patent meditation or patent mindfulness base stress reduction trainings we would be seeing ads for meditation every night on TV. You know, maybe not so many ads for Prozac. I think we'd still be seeing quite a number of ads for Viagra but not so many at least for Prozac or Zoloft. Long story short, I think that meditation is to mental health what aerobic exercise is to physical health. It's just a fundamental practice that has tons of benefits.

**Dr Elise Bialylew:** Thank you, is there anything else that comes up for you that you'd like to leave the listeners with from your work?

**Dr. Rick Hanson:** We should not underestimate the power of little things. It's lots of little things that usually take us to a bad place, it's usually a lot of little good things that takes us to a better one and life gives us opportunities half a dozen or more times a day to internalize a little experience but gradually build up the good stuff we want to grow inside ourselves for our own benefit and to benefit other people and other beings more broadly. I think to close with this saying from the Buddha reaching down to us from 2500 years ago. The saying goes, "Think not lightly of good, saying it will not come to me. Drop by drop is the water pot filled. Likewise the wise one gathering it little by little, fills oneself with good."

**Dr Elise Bialylew :** Thank you so much

