

brain health

and the science of spirituality

Attaining your highest-possible level of brain health requires an approach that includes psychospiritual development, which in turn, will open up new levels of awareness and vitality.

BY JEFF SKOLNICK, MD, PHD

There's a lot of information out there on brain health these days. Most of it is very helpful if you want to improve core brain functions such as memory or even relieve some psychiatric symptoms. Yet, spirituality leads to higher states of experience and maturity, also referred to as psychospirituality. This is usually seen as separate from the brain and from brain health, even though it is acknowledged that meditation and mindfulness offer at least relaxation and stress reduction.

By not including psychospiritual development in our understanding of brain wellness (or wellness in general), we're missing out on an opportunity to get the healthiest brain possible. Conversely, by making our brains vibrantly well, we can better experience the highest stages of human development—these so-called psychospiritual states.

The most advanced levels of psychospiritual attainment are nothing more than a brain functioning at its fullest potential and experiencing at its highest level—the very definition of peak mental health. At these higher levels your brain is at its fullest capability.

Can you imagine anything more draining to your health and debilitating to your brain than being trapped in growing habits of stress? Yet, what else could be more healthful to your brain than appreciating each moment of life and experiencing them as new and fascinating, as if they were artwork—even the really hard and challenging moments! What could be better for your brain than going through life with an easy, fearless, and spontaneous authenticity? Remember, just working towards these more advanced stages of development would be beneficial to your brain and your life.



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So, let’s begin to further explore your brain and the science of spirituality, with one critical piece of information that can help you begin the journey to your brain’s highest potential. It centers around this one crucial, ancient discovery and modern fact: Hidden in plain site is an amazing portal built into the fabric of your brain!

For thousands of years this portal has been known as the Inner Eye (among other names). You know it as the place where you imagine, think to yourself, go to get out of the way of yourself when you are typing or playing a sport, and the place you go to physically balance yourself. When you learn how to recognize, strengthen, and expand this portal it can actually take you from the inevitable stress and emotional problems that come with being born human (called the “human condition”) all the way to the highest “psychospiritual” levels of wellbeing, inner peace, and clarity in life.

The journey from struggle to fulfillment has been known and sought from antiquity, but largely in meditative and other religious traditions. With modern perspectives on the brain, we can better understand the reason for human stress and emotional troubles, and these often-cryptic meditation practices. We’ll get to the reason for stress in a moment. In short,

meditation and mindfulness can be simply seen as brain exercises. Exercises that help you find, trust, and ultimately merge with the circuitry in the cortex of your brain (we’ll explore that further on) that I hypothesize is responsible for this Inner Eye.

What can modern neuroscience tell us about stress and emotional troubles—our journey’s beginning? It begins with the universal understanding that human life and the human brain that negotiates it start out in adulthood configured to cause us stress and emotional struggles! That’s why Buddha, in his First Noble Truth stated simply: “Life is suffering.” It is what psychologists, philosophers, and spiritual masters have observed throughout human history. It’s important to your journey that you realize how universal your “human condition” is.

In other words, everyone hangs on to one or more negative emotions that drag them down. It can include a heart-break or loss, disappointment with others or one’s self, regret for not doing enough, sadness with not achieving an ideal life or having enough, fear of losing looks or functions as one grows older, or worry that life is flying by too quickly—you get the picture.

Of course, these emotions from the human condition don't even include the large percentage of people dealing with mental-health concerns of any degree, life-threatening physical illnesses, addictions, chronic illnesses, or life crises of any kind. Life embodies stress and emotional struggles. (That is, until you learn how to counteract it.) And this means one thing: there's something about our brains that cause us to suffer.

The dysfunction results from the fact that our brains are equipped with "mind" software that, if nothing is done to attenuate it once we reach adulthood, can take over the brain like a virus! This inherited software gives us an adaptive advantage in the evolutionary game of survival to relentlessly seek pleasure, perfection, and meaning, while relentlessly avoiding pain, imperfection, and insignificance. This is so heavily reinforced in childhood and by society, it co-opts our brains. So we stress, hold on to negativity, and drown in our own habits, which are the neural circuits that have been overly reinforced.

How does the mind accomplish its mission? This incredible software assigns labels and stories to any aspects of its experience that can be used to get pleasure or avoid pain. Once it identifies and latches on with a label, story, craving, or phobia, it overtakes our brain. We are the victims of neural circuitry that is programmed into us and reinforced heavily by a society that seeks to civilize us into conformity. This is not a statement of political or social judgment but rather a statement that our brains are sensitive and susceptible to programming.

This is the primary cause of our stress and struggle. It's why, for instance, we seek meaning instead of experience meaning in our existence. Why we disregard the extraordinary pleasures of just being alive and seek out artificial pleasures. It is why we suffer and hold onto negative emotions that come from the mind's labels and stories.

With this understanding, let's take another look at meditative brain exercises using principles of neuroscience and wellness.

The basic neurophysiology is that one main function of the outer layer of the human brain, the most recently and most highly evolved areas, called the cerebral cortex, is to inhibit the habits and reflexes of the lower parts of the brain. Even within the cerebral cortex itself, there are areas that are higher and able to inhibit and direct areas in the rest of the cortex that are lower and susceptible to habit.

So, job one in this inner journey is to learn to amp up those highest areas in the cerebral cortex that inhibit habits. These areas help you detach from, defocus from, de-identify with, and more objectively, witness the reality created by our labels and stories, along with the cravings and fears that come with them. At the same time, these areas inhibit habit, they are freed up to gain a firmer grasp on the truer reality of this moment. In other words, releasing these habits helps us become ever more intensely focused on the astonishing

reality of our existence right now and the magnitude of each moment we are alive. That's what psychospiritual attainment is all about.

Another neuroscientific principle explains how this brain-transformation process works—the process that frees our brains and lives from habitual states of unhappiness and self-imprisonment. I call it "developmental neuroplasticity."

Neuroplasticity is the human brain's astonishing ability to change and adapt. We're learning, for example, that stroke victims can recover movement previously believed to be lost forever by using other areas of the brain that typically serve other functions. Even the auditory area, for instance, can be trained for use in place of damaged visual areas.


Applying the principle of neuroplasticity to personal development—it becomes "developmental neuroplasticity." In other words, we can use the amazing capacity of the brain to substantially change itself, not only towards the task of improving specific functions but towards developing the brain to its highest levels of experience and functioning.

"Developmental neuroplasticity" explains why, for thousands of years "amazing" transformations have been documented and witnessed in otherwise ordinary people. Transformations, I theorize, that resulted from strengthening the cortical circuits in the brain that we know as our Inner Eye. Thus, they were freed from the oppressive habits of experience and functioning to which the human brain is highly susceptible (even transcending the habit of how they sense themselves!).

Habits, as opposed to intentional rituals, always turn unhealthy and are universally acknowledged to be the cause of ill health and stress. In place of these oppressive habits, a highly engaged and in-control brain is able to fully grasp and flow through the deceptively simple experience of being alive each moment. That takes brain health to accomplish and that leads to even more brain health in return.

As a psychiatrist and naturopathic practitioner with advanced training in neuropsychology and over thirty years of Zen meditation practice, I've become an expert on the brain and spirituality, particularly as it involves mental-health conditions. From these experiences and trainings, as well as neurobehavioral modeling, I created the SatoriWest Method. The SatoriWest Method is a modern take on ancient holistic Buddhist approaches.

This method is centered on the series of brain exercises I call inshifting. Inshifting exercises strengthen the circuits of the Inner Eye, so that your brain lives more fully and in a more easy and authentic flow with each moment. These inshifting exercises are not easy to master, but are as doable as many skills we learn throughout our lives.

In the 21st century, the ancient journey to full-brain health really ought to be your road to fulfillment, the avenue to your highest well-being. 

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