

A Brain Basis for Transforming Consciousness with Mind-Body Bridging*

Stanley Block, Shao-Hsuan Ho, Yoshi Nakamura

This presentation explores the brain basis of the transformation of consciousness and improved physical and mental functioning that result from a clinical intervention program, Mind-Body Bridging (MBB). The principles of MBB, developed by clinicians over the past ten years, appear strongly related to the teachings of many spiritual traditions. This paper will attempt to link the two main principles of MBB with the neuroscience and postulate brain mechanisms that account for the clinical benefits of MBB.

MBB teaches the patient to recognize and become aware of a dysfunctional mind-body state characterized by engrossment with self-centered thoughts (Storylines), involuntary contraction of awareness, body tension, and impaired mental and physical functioning. This is the state resulting from an overactive Identity System. Using written free-association exercises, called Mind-Body Mapping, the patient learns that Storylines are not random, but revolve around specific thoughts called “Requirements”, our ideas about how we and the world “should be” at each moment. Violations of these Requirements trigger the over-activation of the Identity System. MBB can teach the patient 1) how to rest his or her Identity System by Awareness Practices and 2) how to prevent the Identity System from being triggered by “Defusing” Requirements. When patients employ these MBB techniques, they rest the Identity System and automatically resume a mode of balanced and harmonious mental and physical functioning. Their awareness automatically expands to better embrace its adaptive role, when liberated from the harness of the Identity System to perceive reality as it is. Otherwise, the Identity System “moves into the drivers seat,” constricting consciousness by giving highest priority to fulfilling Requirements.

Neuroscience research has found two networks of functioning, executive network and default-mode network; they have different characteristics. The executive network dynamically regulates the mind in relation to the moment-by-moment situational goals, while the default-mode network stores life-long salient autobiographical memory used to construe one’s identity. It is postulated that if an event matches certain pre-existing conditions stored in the default network (Requirements), the network will respond with intense arousal and compulsivity. The activation of the default-mode network is accompanied by the deactivation of the executive network. Conversely, selective attention to a cognitive task or to sensory modalities (Awareness Practice) can activate the executive network and regulate the stress responses by inhibiting the default-mode network. Furthermore, the Mind-Body Mapping facilitates a new learning to rectify the invalid associations stored in the default-mode network. Taken together, these considerations help us link the corresponding states of 1) expansion and contraction of awareness and 2) resting and overactive Identity System with underlying brain mechanisms involved in MBB.

MBB carries the Awareness Practices one critical step further by addressing the cause for the resistances to clarity, i.e. afflictions caused by the Identity System. The awareness of the experiential and phenomenal aspects of the Identity System accounts for its therapeutic effectiveness, and clinical data will be presented. The transformation of consciousness that results from MBB is more aptly seen as a liberation of consciousness that has been constricted by the Identity System.

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