

Mindfulness of Feeling Tone/Vedanā

Sacramento Insight Meditation

July 11, 2024

Rick Maddock



Vedanā = feeling tone, or tonality, or hedonic tone.

The feeling quality accompanying all experience that ranges from pleasant, through neutral, to unpleasant.

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“All phenomena converge on Vedanā.”

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Vedanā ≠ **Emotions**

The Five Aggregates (Skandhas)

1. **Rupa** = form.

2. **Vedanā** = feeling tone.

3. **Sanña** = recognition or perception.

4. **Saṅkhāra** = intention or fabrication or choices.

5. **Viññāṇa** = consciousness or awareness.

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Emotions are
comprised of
Feeling tones
Perceptions
and
Intentions

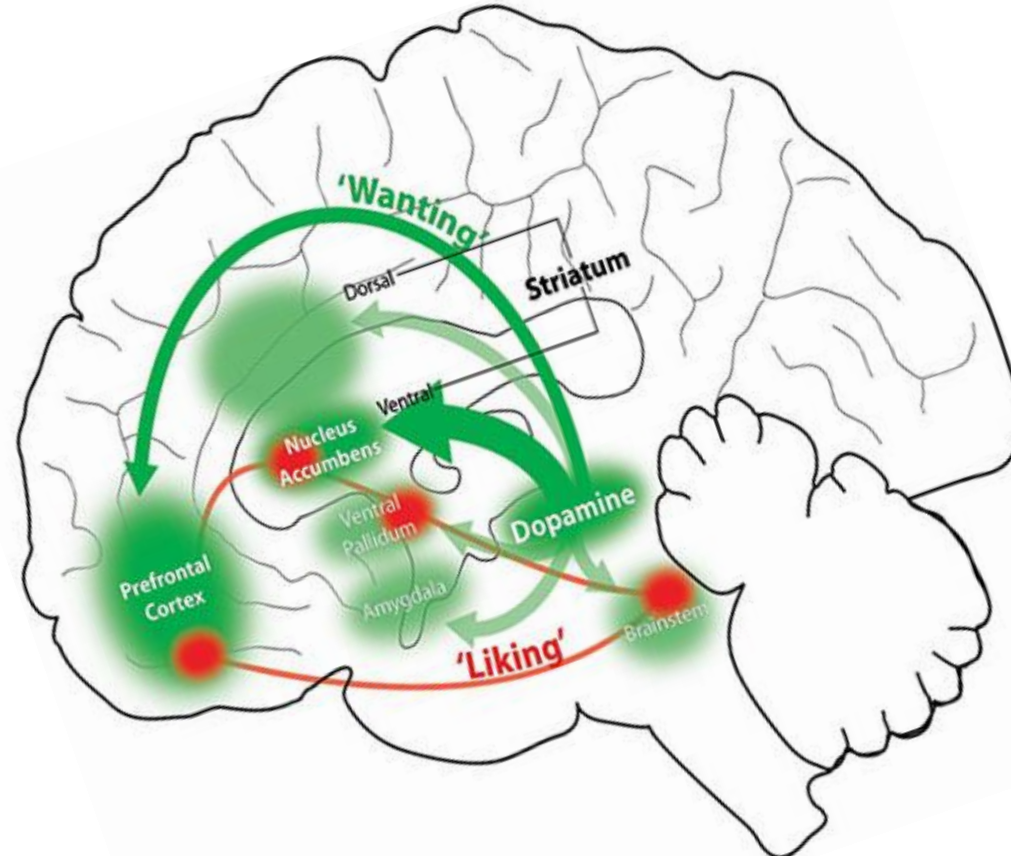
Analayo describes **underlying tendencies** associated with each of the three feeling tones:

- to crave for an increase of what is pleasant,
- to crave for a reduction or vanishing of what is unpleasant,
- to crave for a more entertaining alternative to what is neutral.

-Analayo, “Why be mindful of feelings?”
Contemporary Buddhism, 19: 47-53, 2018
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14639947.2018.1450958>

Liking (vedanā) is the core hedonic experience of pleasure.

Wanting (craving) is a more complex state, which includes the disposition to seek a specific source of pleasure.



midline view
of
human brain

Liking – endogenous opiate and cannabinoid circuits

Wanting – dopaminergic circuits

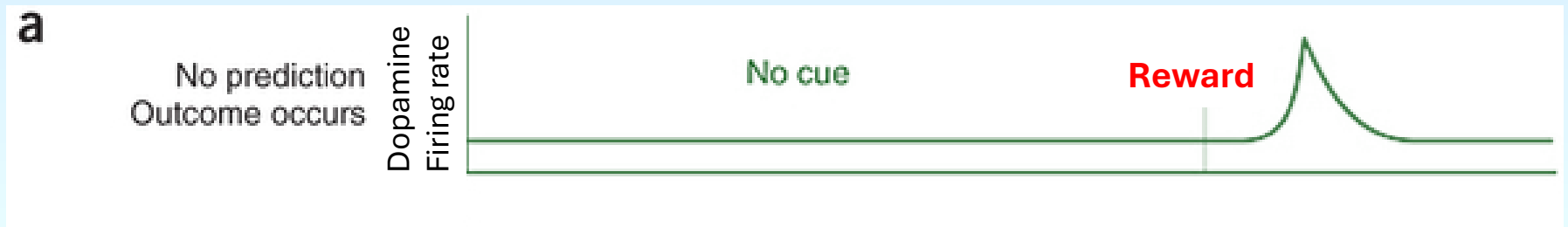
Activation of this tendency → clinging & grasping

from Berridge 2018

Liking teaches Wanting

Dopamine has a key role in **Wanting**

Graphic shows **dopaminergic** response to information about **rewards**

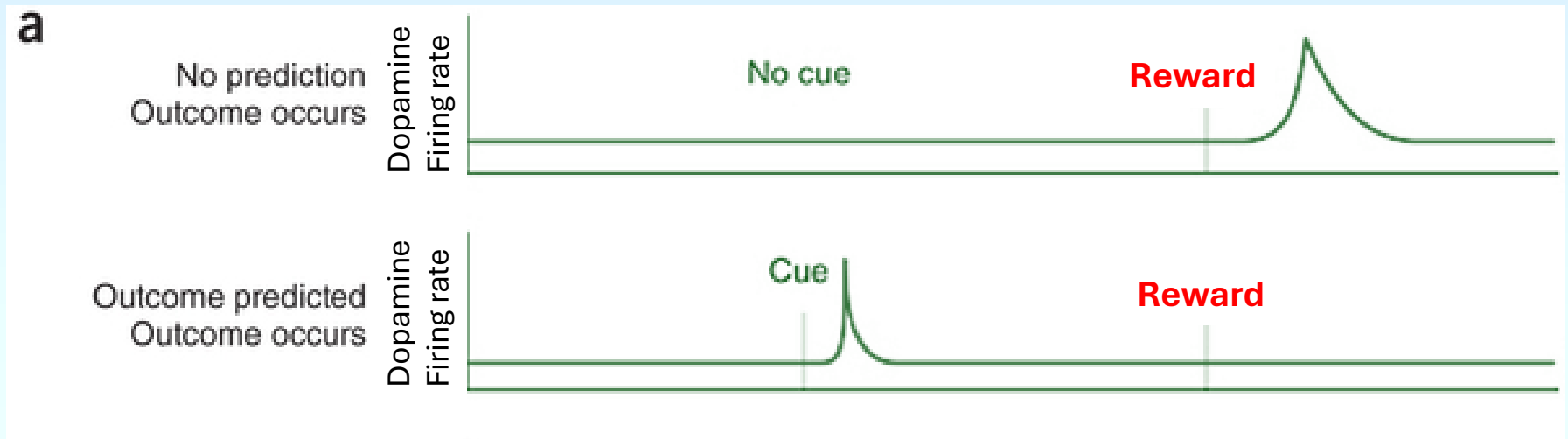


Unexpected reward activates **Dopamine neurons**.

Liking teaches Wanting

Dopamine has a key role in **Wanting**

Graphic shows **dopaminergic** response to information about **rewards**



Dopamine neurons don't respond to expected rewards.

They respond to *new appearances* of **predictive cues**.

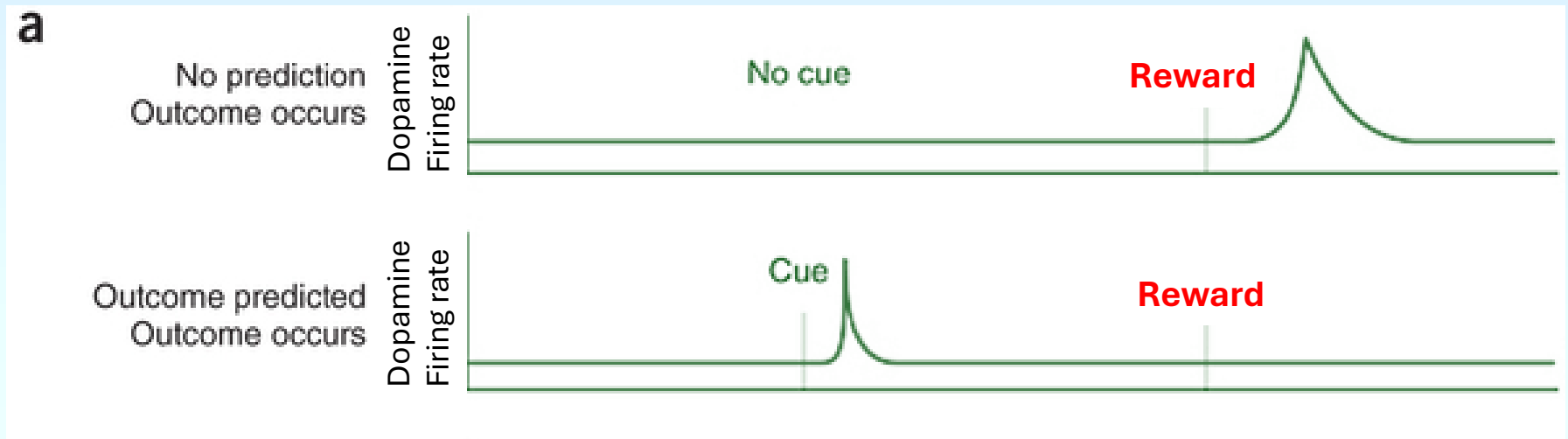
Dopamine represents *new information* about **rewards**.

It's a "teaching signal." We learn where to **look for anticipated rewards**

Liking teaches Wanting

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Graphic shows **dopaminergic** response to information about **rewards**



Sometimes the **craving** is stronger than the subsequent **liking** that accompanies the **reward**.

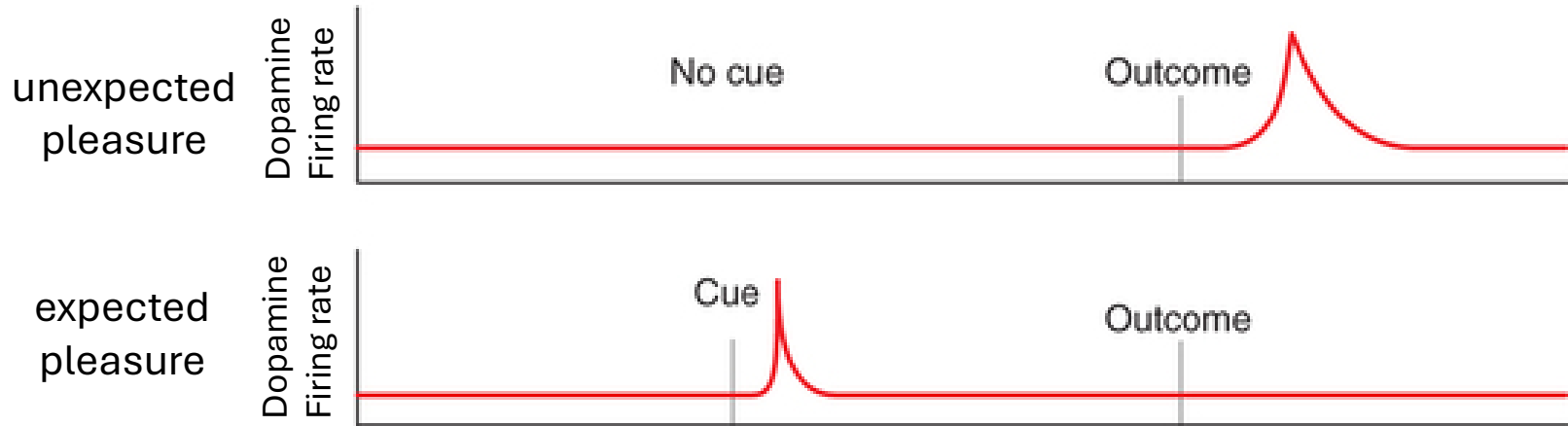
This neural system can lead to a situation where **reward cues** acquire great **power over a person's behavior**

Things Productive of Suffering Sutta - SN 35:244 (Sujato)

Describes how a person skillfully navigates pleasurable experiences with an understanding of these underlying tendencies.

"Suppose a person was to enter a thicket full of thorns. They'd have thorns in front and behind, to the left and right, below and above. *So they'd go forward mindfully and come back mindfully, thinking, 'May I not get any thorns!'* "

"In the same way, whatever in the world seems nice and pleasant is called a thorn in the training of the Noble One. When they understand what a thorn is, they should *understand restraint and lack of restraint.*"



The “wanting” triggered by pleasant experience is embodied as a dopamine “spike” in a subcortical nucleus.

These spikes are like the ” thorns” in the Buddha’s metaphor.

Things Productive of Suffering Sutta - SN 35:244 (Sujato)

Describes conditions that make restraint more likely:

“When they understand what a thorn is, they should *understand restraint and lack of restraint.*”

”How is someone restrained? ... They abide with mindfulness of the body established and a limitless heart. They truly understand the freedom of heart and freedom by wisdom where ... unskillful qualities cease...”

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The sutta goes on to describe what happens when mindfulness that has been well-cultivated is occasionally lost:

“If this happens, their mindfulness is slow to come up, but they quickly give them up, get rid of, eliminate ...” those unskillful reactions.

“This is how a mendicant has awakened to a way of ... living such that ... unskillful qualities ...don’t overwhelm them. “

Analayo describes **three benefits of mindfulness of feelings**:

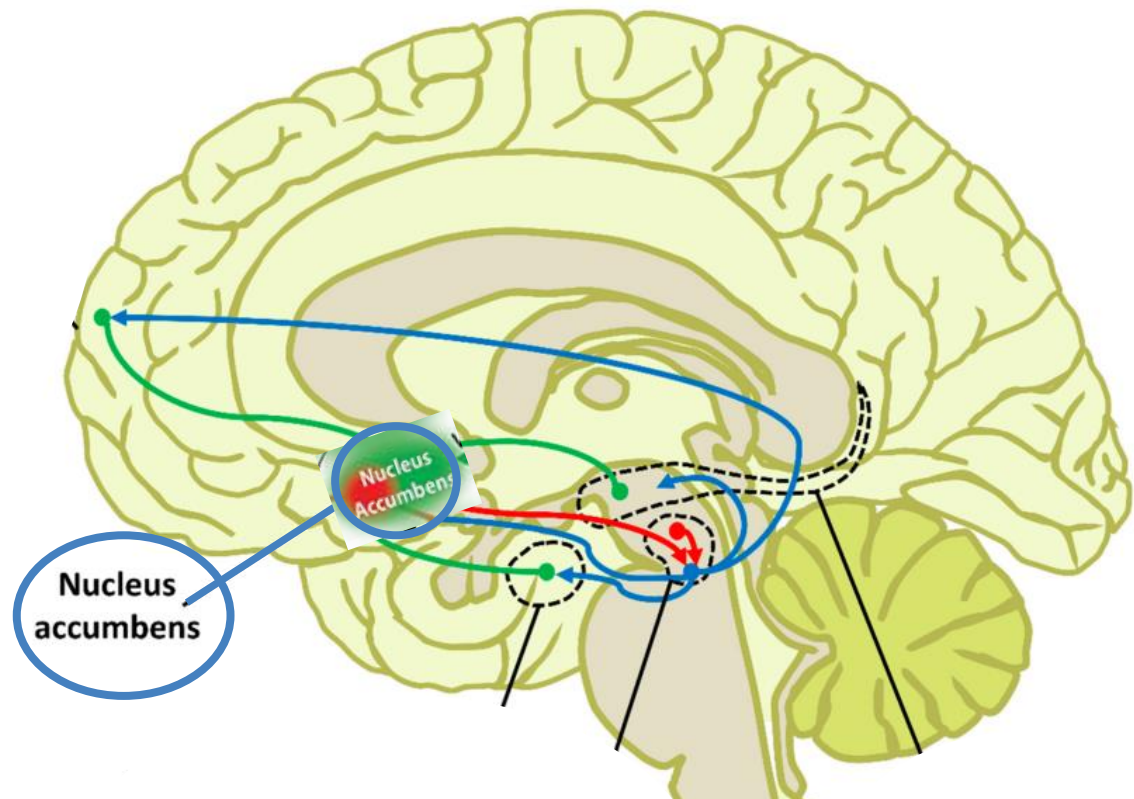
1. break the instinctive link between vedana and craving or aversion
2. abandon the mental proliferation often triggered by strong vedana
3. hold our views more lightly, by seeing how how the pleasant feeling of being "right" leads to clinging to views and quarreling

-Analayo, "Why be mindful of feelings?"
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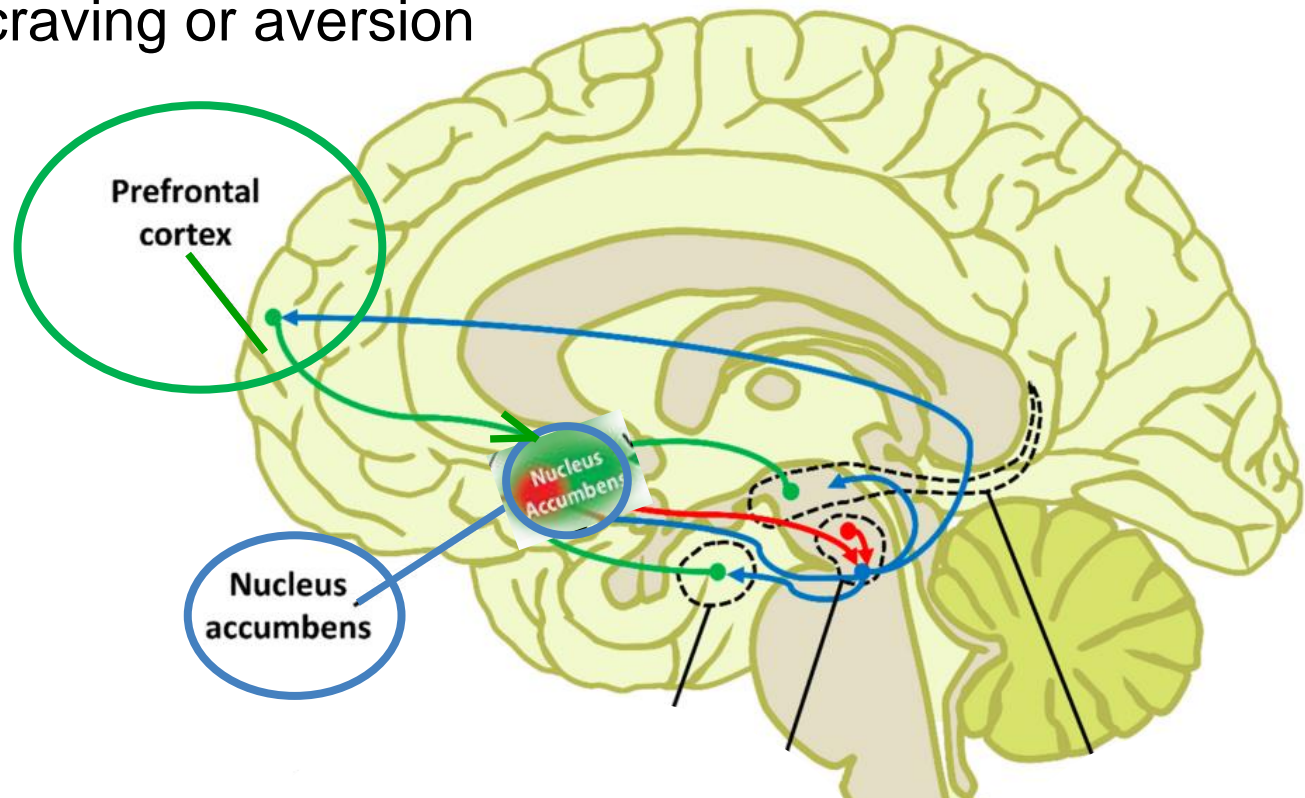
Nucleus accumbens circuits for “pleasant” and “craving” are linked

Liking – endogenous opiate and cannabinoid circuits

Wanting – dopaminergic circuits

Activation of this tendency → clinging & grasping

The brain has circuits for governing the instinctive link between vedana and craving or aversion



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The Arrow Sutta SN 36.6

transl. by Sujato

"...When an unlearned ordinary person experiences painful physical feelings they sorrow and wail and lament, beating their breast and falling into confusion. They experience two feelings: physical and mental.

... It's like a person who is struck with an arrow, only to be struck with a second arrow. That person experiences the feeling of two arrows.

... When a learned noble disciple experiences painful physical feelings they don't sorrow or wail or lament, beating their breast and falling into confusion. They experience one feeling: physical, not mental."

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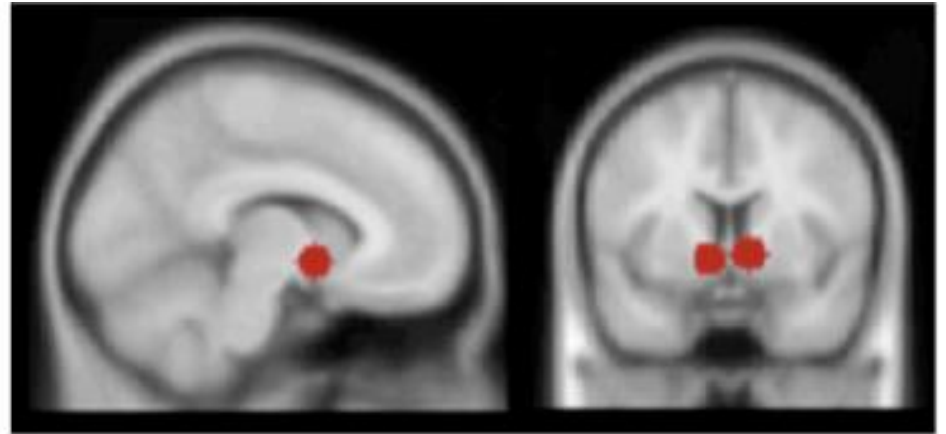
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Reward circuits influence over-valuing of one's own views

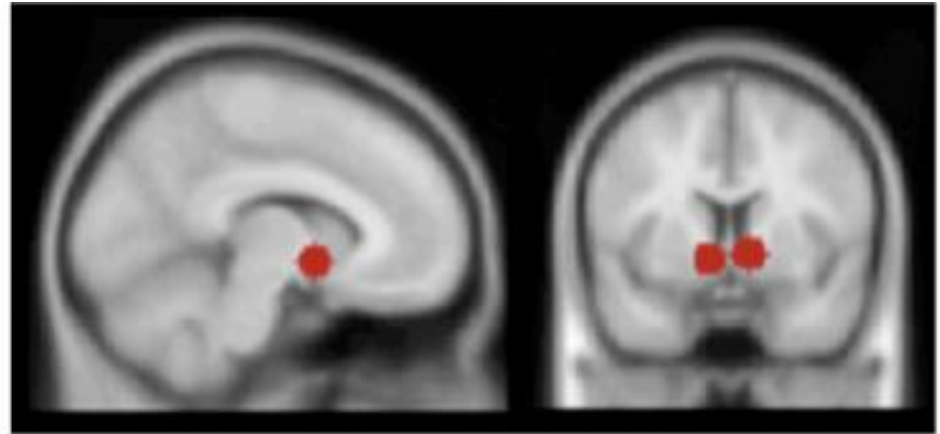
Nucleus Accumbens shown in RED

During an fMRI scan, volunteers described either their own opinions, other's opinions or generally accepted facts

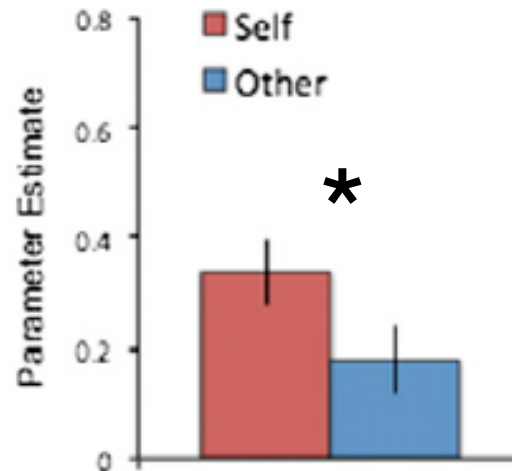


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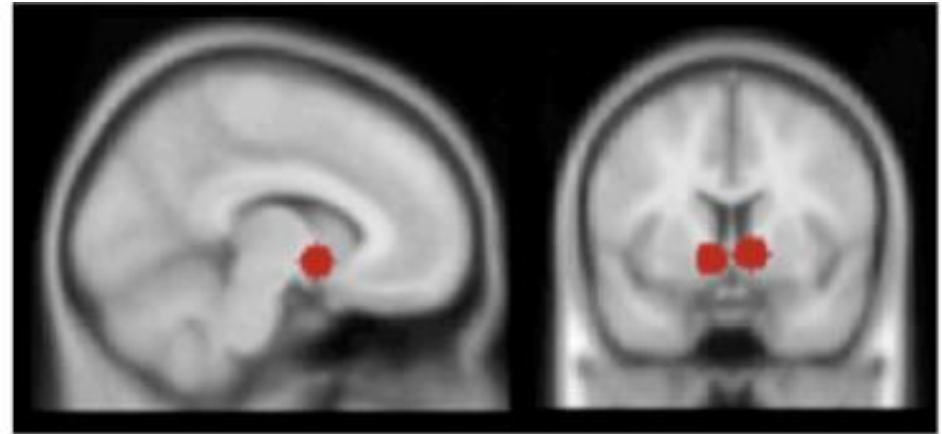


Nucleus Accumbens activation

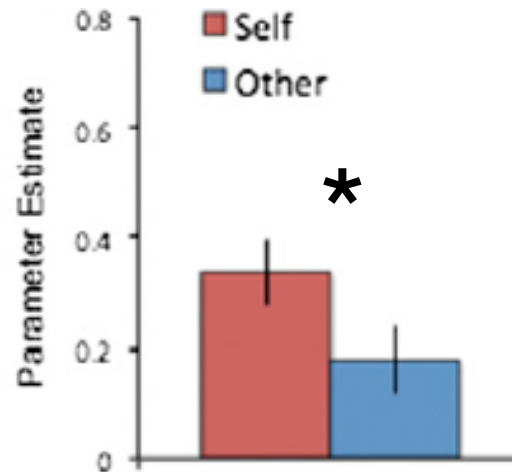
Describing own vs. other's opinions

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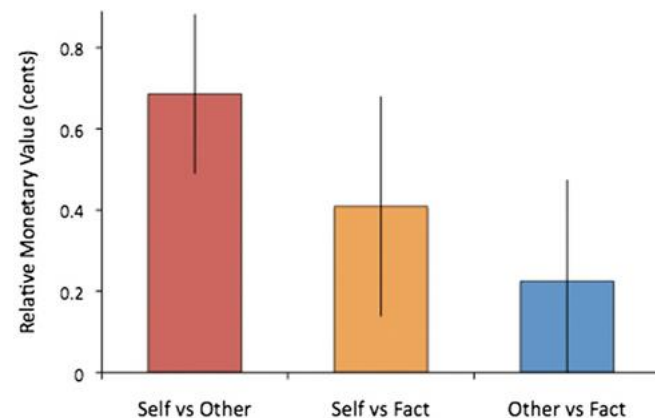
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Nucleus Accumbens activation

Describing own vs. other's opinions

Monetary value of describing opinions



Vedana associated with “selfing” influences feelings & choices

Things associated with the valued self are themselves valued. Example: ***The ownership effect***

Coffee mugs are shown to economics students. The \$ value of the mugs is established by asking how much they would pay to buy a mug, right now (~ \$3.00).



Generic mug, value ~ **\$3.00**

Vedana associated with “selfing” influences feelings & choices

Things associated with the valued self are themselves valued. Example: ***The ownership effect***

Then, other students are **gifted a mug** and asked how much \$ they would accept as payment for it (~ \$5.50). When an object (or idea) becomes “mine,” its value increases.



“My” mug, value ~ **\$5.50**

Anything incorporated into the extended self acquires “self-value” (usually positive value).

Association with Self Confers Value Unconsciously



subliminal image of
"owned" or "not owned"
object

Gawronski et al, 2007

Association with Self Confers Value Unconsciously



subliminal image of
"owned" or "not owned"
object

random
shape

Association with Self Confers Value

Unconsciously



“Rate the degree of positive feelings you have about this shape”

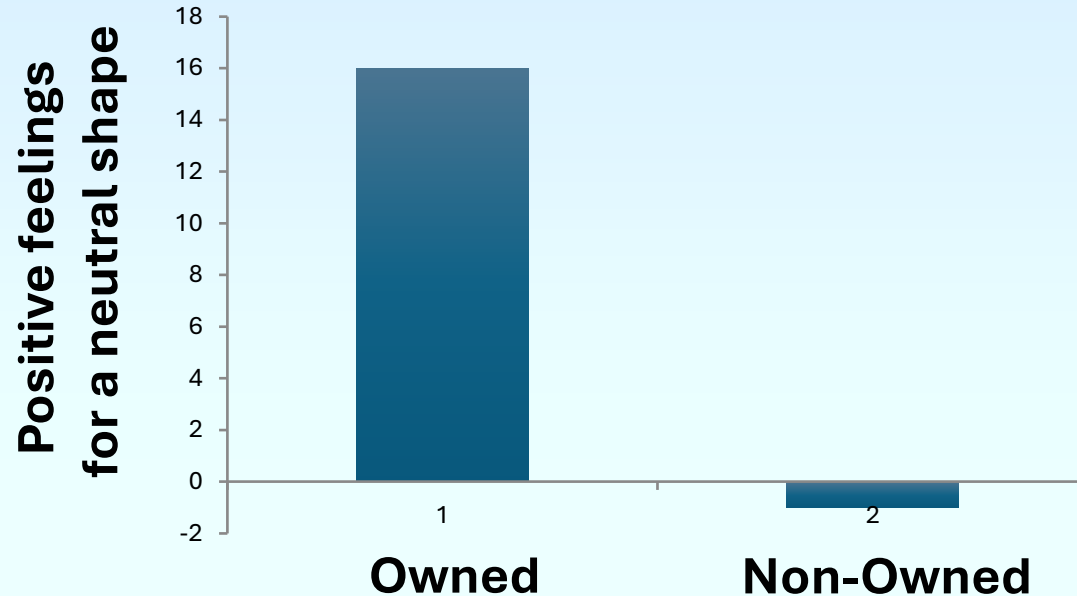


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Association with Self Confers Value Unconsciously



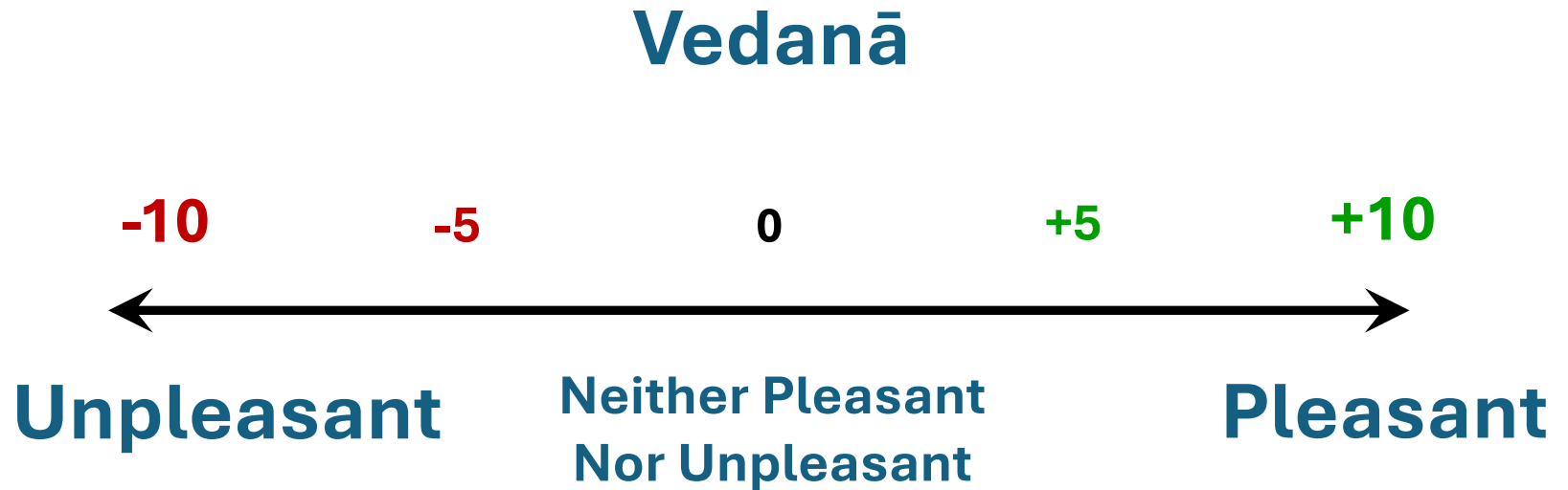
Positive evaluation is greater for the “owned” subliminal object.

This effect is correlated with Self-Evaluation (self-esteem).

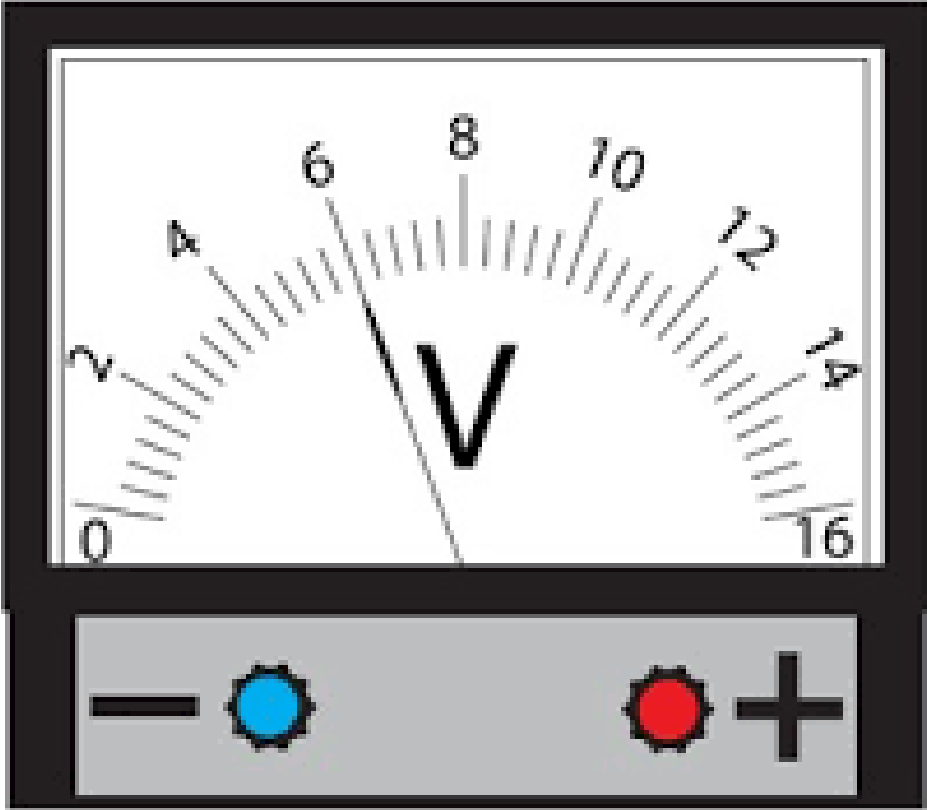
Practicing Mindfulness of Feeling Tone/Vedanā



Visual Imagery can aid with practicing mindfulness of tonality



Neutral



Negative

Positive

Vedanā Meter

Satipatthana Sutta MN 10 transl. by Sujato

“... They meditate observing feelings as liable to originate, as liable to vanish, and as liable to both originate and vanish.

... mindfulness is established that feelings exist, **to the extent necessary for knowledge and mindfulness.**

They meditate independent, **not grasping at anything in the world.**

That’s how a mendicant meditates by observing an aspect of feelings.”

AN 6.85 “Cooled” Sutta (Thanissaro)

“gladdening the mind when it should be gladdened” is a necessary condition for freeing the mind.

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AN 10.2 “Making a wish” Sutta (Sujato)

*“Mendicants, an ethical person, who has fulfilled **ethical conduct**, need not make a wish: ‘May I have no regrets!’ It’s only **natural that an ethical person has no regrets.***

*When you have no regrets you need not make a wish: ‘May I feel joy!’ It’s only **natural that joy springs up** when you have no regrets.”*

AN 10.2 “Making a wish” Sutta (...continuation) (Sujato)

*“... It’s only natural that **joy** springs up when you have **no regrets**.*

*... When your body is **tranquil** you need not make a wish: ‘May I feel bliss!’ It’s only **natural to feel bliss** when your body is tranquil.*

*When you feel bliss you need not make a wish: ‘May my mind be immersed in samādhi!’ It’s only **natural for the mind to be immersed in samādhi** when you feel bliss.*

*When your mind is immersed in samādhi you need not make a wish: ‘May I truly know and see!’ It’s only **natural to truly know and see** [the way things are] when your mind is immersed in samādhi.”*

The potential of pleasant feelings

Analayo, Insight Journal 44: 1-10, 2018

Describes types of pleasant feeling that further our practice
(citing the Kandarakka Sutta – MN 51)

- The pleasures of behaving ethically (anavajja-sukha)
- The pleasures that arise along with sense restraint (abyāsekha-sukha)
- The pleasures that accompany meditative practices (sati and samadhi)

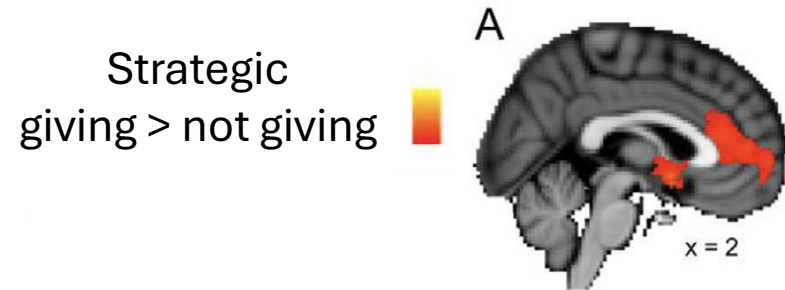
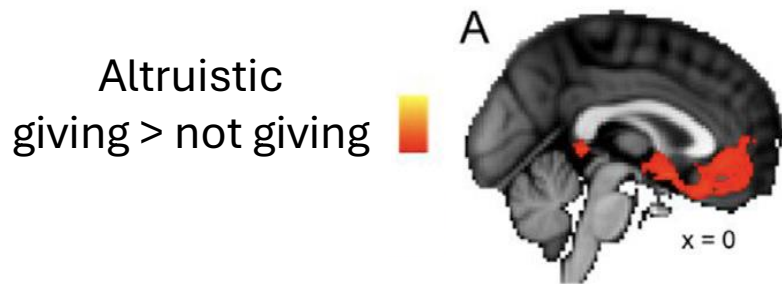
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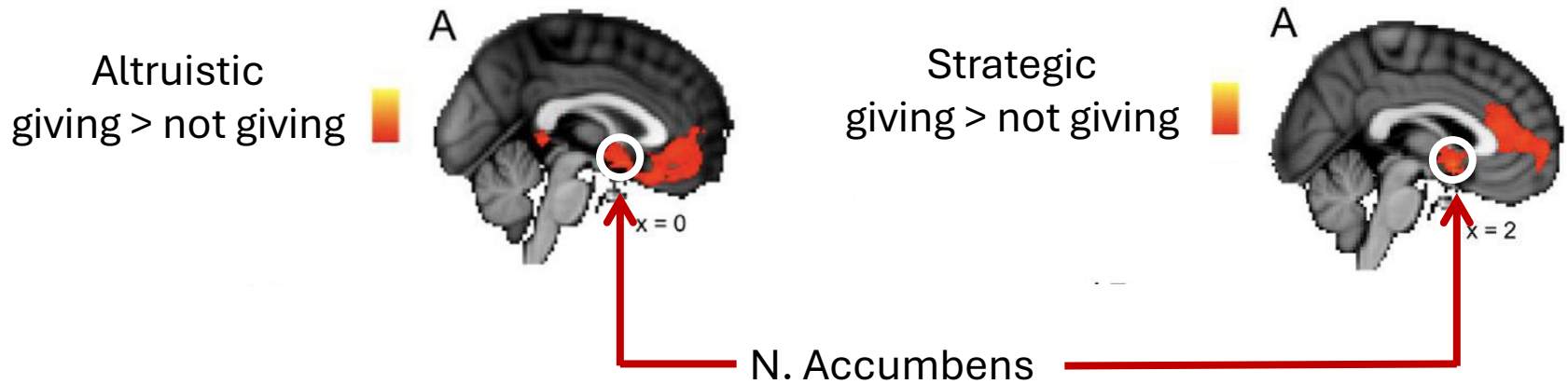
Summary of 36 studies of pro-social behavior



Altruistic: no external reward,
only internal satisfaction

Strategic: improves own situation,
via reciprocity, reputation or public good

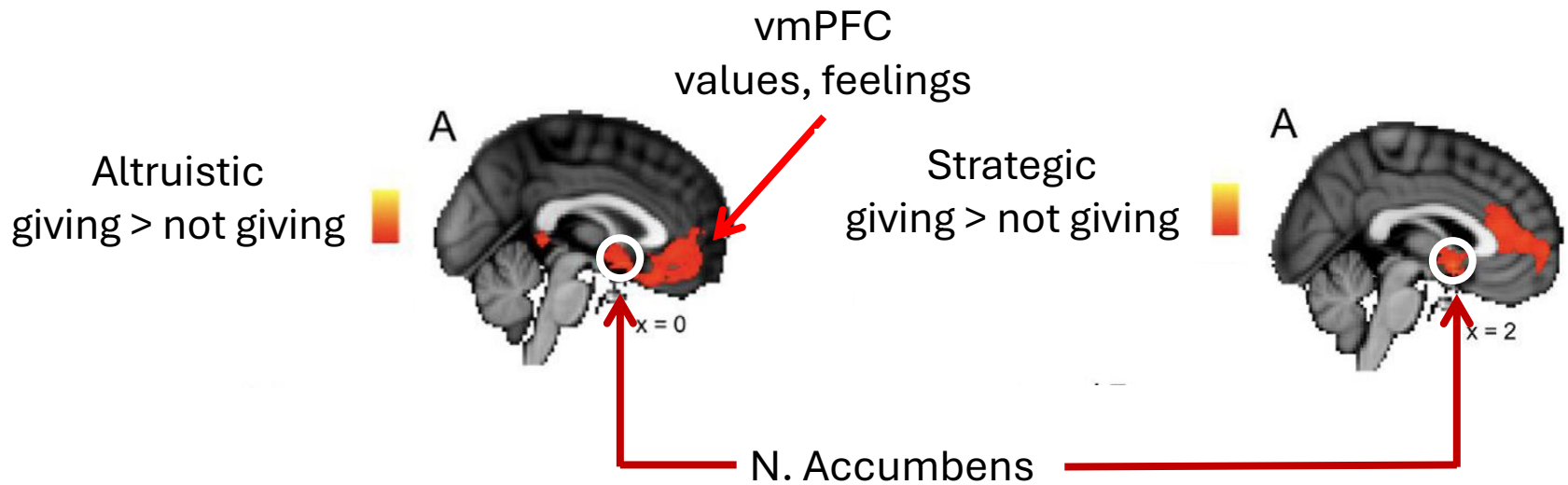
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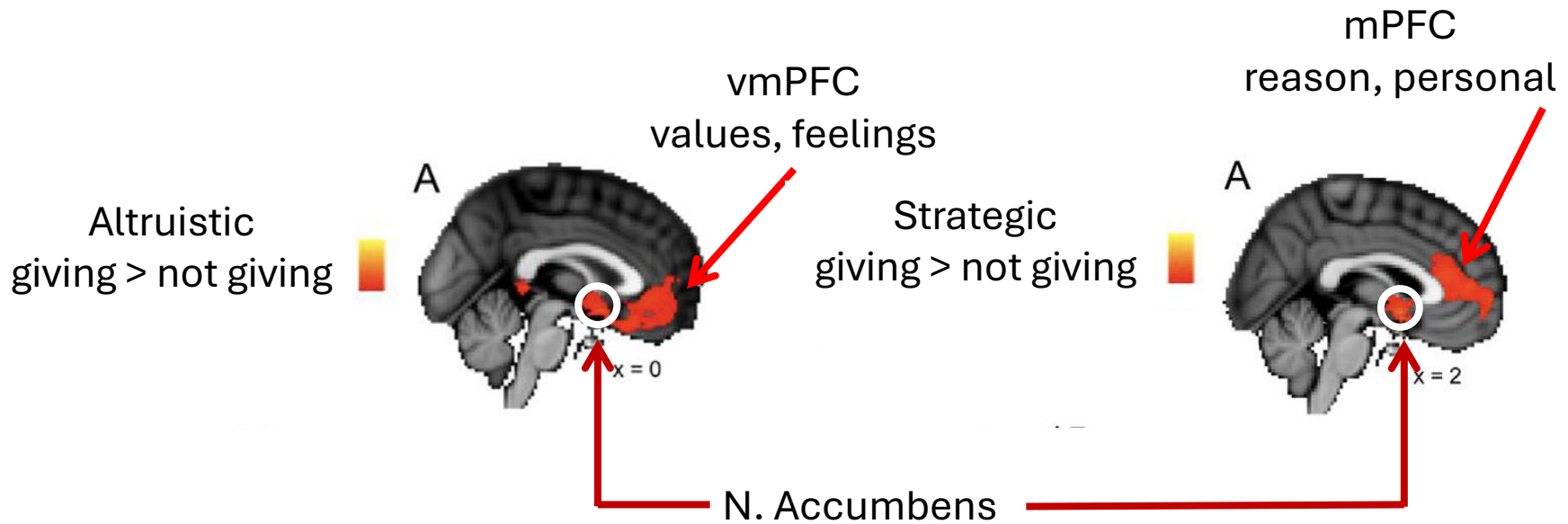
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"Unimpaired" happiness is pleasant feeling that arises when the mind is not seizing onto “signs” that fuel lust or anger or delusion.

Mahāvedalla-sutta MN 43 (Analayo)

“Friend, lust is a maker of signs, anger is a maker of signs, and delusion is a maker of signs. These are abandoned in a monastic who has eradicated the in-fluxes.”

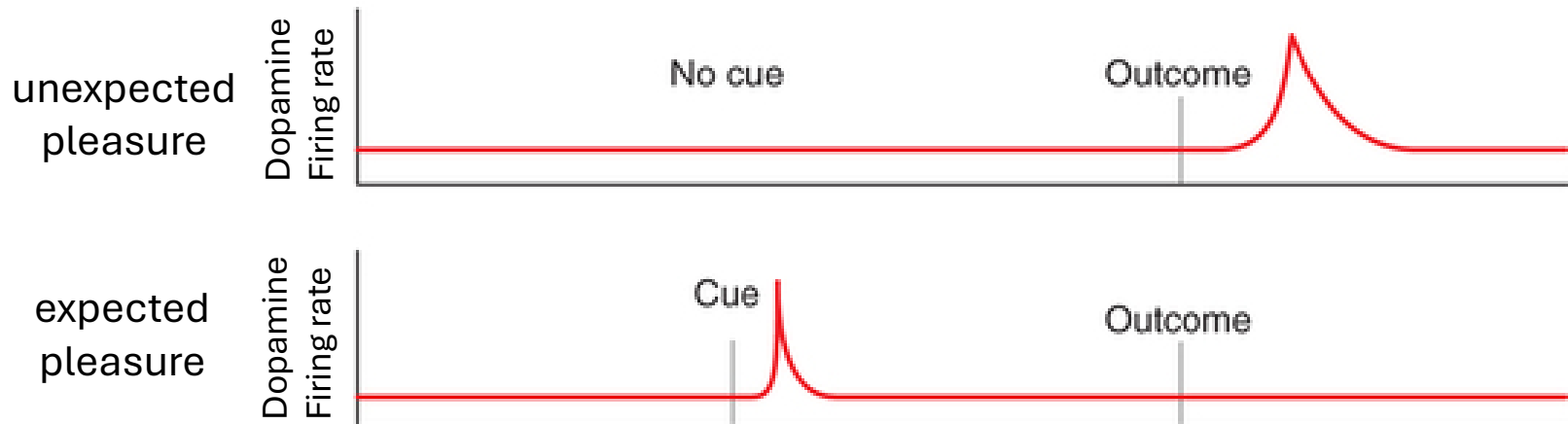
“Sign” (nimitta) here refers to how the mind takes a pleasurable experience and distills it down to a sign (symbol, icon), which it uses to generate anticipatory pleasure or outrage in support of craving or aversion.

When a pickpocket meets a saint, he sees only the [sign of the] saint’s pockets.

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Pleasure teaching wanting (via dopamine)
is one of the ways that lust makes a “sign” in the brain

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(sati and samadhi)

The potential of pleasant feelings

Analayo, Insight Journal 44: 1-10, 2018

"Simply being with mindfulness established in the present moment, a subtle type of joy can be experienced. This joy manifests because the mind is not impaired ... by being caught up in reactivity & proliferation of what has been experienced..."

"consciously cultivating the subtle joy of being in the present moment, ... the mind can be taught that it is rewarding to remain with the experience of the breath."

"... the tendency of pleasant feeling to attract the mind can be made use of ... to foster mental collectedness and counter the tendency to distraction."

Questions, Comments, Discussion?