To Activate Your Mind

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When the Buddha describes the mind in and of itself as a frame of reference, in some cases the qualities he talks about are obviously skillful and unskillful. Concentration versus no concentration. Release versus no release. Restricted mind. The scattered mind is one that has too much energy. The restricted mind has too little. In cases like that, you have to find a balance. You have to learn how to read your mind so you know what it needs. The breath can be used both to settle a scattered mind and to expand a restricted mind. You can make up your mind that you’re just going to be with the breath as it comes in, as it goes out. You’re not going to think about anything. You’re not going to engage in any directed thought and evaluation, anything more than just stay with the breath, stay with the breath. Let it be comfortable, but don’t think too much about it. That can settle the mind that’s been too scattered. For the mind that’s been too restricted, in other words, there’s plenty of sloth and torpor, plenty of drowsiness. You’ve got to figure out ways to enliven it. There are ways of breathing that are energizing. In long and out short is one. You can try heavy breathing, especially when you’re on your own. If you try too much heavy breathing while we’re sitting here as a group, it disturbs the other people. It’s like it’s activating the body. John Lee’s image is of having electric wires strung throughout the wilderness and then sending electricity through them. Think of the whole body, from the top of the head down to the soles of the feet, and everything’s connected. There’s electricity running through all the wires, lighting up the whole body. But sometimes the breath on its own is not enough. The Buddha says the activating qualities among the factors of awakening are analysis of qualities, persistence, and rapture. If you can’t induce rapture through the breath, then you go back to analysis of qualities, thinking about a topic that’s a little bit more discursive, but still related to the body, related to the mind right here in the present moment. You can think of all the parts of the body. John Mung would start his students out on contemplation of the body. He’d have them start with the skeleton. Think of the bones of the fingers, the bones of the hands, work up through the arms to the shoulders, and start down with the toes, up through the feet, the legs, the pelvis, up the spine. Visualize a particular bone, and then ask yourself, where is that bone right now? Try to create a sense of locating it. In your body. You don’t have to reflect on it being clean or unclean. It’s just there in this weird thing in your body. These bones. We stumble across a skeleton, and it’s scary. Here we are walking around with one all the time. There was a case years back. I went down once. A dead body was found up on the mountain behind the monastery. And the police were called in. And because it was a poor area, the police didn’t want to get too much involved. So they said, oh, it’s obviously somebody who died a long time ago. There’s nothing much left but a skeleton and a little bit of flesh. Obviously it was an old person. And so they buried the bones. But they didn’t want to bury the skull in just any old place for fear that someone might dig it up and get freaked out. So they brought it to the monastery. I was lucky I followed them. I pointed out a place under a tree in the area. Well, it turned out it was someone who had died just a month before. And he was young. A drug addict had gone up and overdosed. The family came looking for him. And because most of the body was scattered, they came to the monastery to get the skull. We had lots of cases in Thailand where you could reflect on the impermanence of the body. You tend to see a lot more dead bodies over there than you do here. Here they get cleaned up pretty quickly. But it’s good to remind yourself you’re walking around with what’s going to become a corpse someday. And you think of all the concerns and all the worries and all the pride and all the other unskillful attitudes that we have around the body. And yet what do you have? Just material things. It’s good to think about that every now and then. One, it wakes you up. And two, it gives you some more motivation for wanting to train the mind. So you might try some body contemplation to activate the mind, energize the mind. Give rise to a sense of samvigha. Because that’s what we’re working on, is developing the proper qualities of the mind that you can bring to the meditation. If there’s a sense of urgency, a sense of dismay, or not practicing, that can activate and light a little fire under you. There are other qualities, though, you can develop as well. When we do the contemplation of goodwill, all too often it’s very generic. Beings to the east, beings to the west, the north, south, above and below. And that kind of contemplation is good for giving you a sense of where you are right now. It’s especially good to do. First thing in the morning. It establishes your awareness here in the center. It gets your bearings for the rest of the world. But sometimes that kind of generic all beings here, all beings there, is just too generalized. So make it more specific. Think of all the people who have helped you in one way or another. Your parents, your teachers, friends. People who have helped you in ways that are more impersonal. People who have read good books that have inspired you. Artists that have inspired you. Dedicate merit to everyone individually. All the people you can think of that you’re indebted to. Dedicate the merit of your practice. Spread thoughts of goodwill. Wherever they are, may they be happy. If they’re suffering right now, may the merit of your practice help them. If they approve of your merit, that can help them get out of some bad places they may be. But do it very specifically. I had a student one time. They told whom she told she should do some body contemplation. So he said, okay, pull out all your hair in your mind and then plant it back in. So two minutes later she said, okay, it’s done. He said, no. You can plant a handfuls if you want, but if you’re going to replant it, plant it one hair at a time. That’ll take a lot of time. So keep the mind active and in touch with your body right here, right now. Or you can think of the Buddha. The person who found this path that we’re following. The kind of person he was. What you know of the Buddha’s life. Think about incidents that you find inspiring. Times where he went out of his way to help people. Or times when he showed some particular wisdom in his own practice. His wisdom, his compassion, his purity. Think of specific instances that inspire you. That can help wake you up. Another topic you can think about is mindfulness of death. It can happen at any time. I don’t know if you felt the tremor just now as we were chatting, but the big one could come any day. Meaning the big earthquake that they promised for California. And who knows how strong it might be. That solid might collapse on you. Or you could have your own big one inside. The little clot develops someplace. And the body starts wandering around. Gets lodged in the brain. Lodged in the heart. Lodged in the kidneys. It doesn’t take much to bring an end to the life of this body. So you don’t know how much time you have. But you do know that you have this time right here, right now. So make the most of it. That’s always the way the Buddha treats mindfulness of death. It’s not death, death, death, death, death all the time. It’s I could die. What should I do now? What’s the most skillful thing I can do? What’s the most useful thing to prepare myself? These contemplations are called guardian meditations. Recollection of the Buddha. Goodwill. Contemplation of the body. Mindfulness of death. They can stir you up to practice. And when you find that your energy is low, your mind is beginning to drift off and get lazy and blurry, they can bring things back into focus. Because we have to remember, we do have these potentials inside us. There is the potential for laziness, but there’s also the potential for energy. There’s the potential for distraction, but there’s also the potential for getting the mind to be centered, settled, still. We have to learn how to activate the right potentials. And if you find that you’re running out of energy, some of these contemplations are useful. You think about what’s skillful and what’s unskillful in the mind, then try to develop skillful qualities. And bring some imagination to them. How you contemplate the body. You can imagine all different kinds of ways of dividing it up, looking at the different organs. You can use your imagination on how you contemplate the Buddha. And how you spread goodwill. There are times when the meditation seems to be too much of a process that you’re putting the mind through, almost mechanically. And it’s good to remind yourself that you can use your imagination. Think of the topics that activate the mind, energize the mind. So you can bring things into balance. After all, this is the middle way. You don’t follow it by being frenetically energetic, but you don’t follow it by being lazy and blurry. You want to get the mind right in the right state, balanced, clear, ready to work.

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