

A Cure for the Sluggish Mind

March 2, 2021

When you sit down to meditate, take stock of your body, take stock of your mind. Look to see where things are out of balance. With the body, it's always good to energize it first. Take a couple of good long, deep, in-and-out breaths, because eventually you're going to be calming things down. If things are already too calm, by calming them down further—through the way you breathe, the way you focus—you're going to put yourself to sleep. Or you'll drift off into delusion concentration, where the mind is still, but there's not much alertness, not much awareness—which is not what you want. So energize the body.

Then look at the mind: Is it too energetic, or is it too sluggish? From that, figure out what needs to be done. If it's too sluggish, think of the Buddha's image of a fire that's beginning to go out. You don't pour more dust and water on the fire. You try to give it fuel. In terms of the factors for awakening, you start with mindfulness, remembering that the state of your mind may be affected by things outside. As the pandemic gets long, it's very easy to focus on how long it's been going on, and how much longer it looks like it'll continue. When you're trapped in limited circumstances, it's easy to focus on what's wrong with those circumstances—and that pulls you down. So mindfulness reminds you: Things outside may be bad, but the *mind* doesn't have to be bad. It doesn't have to feed on bad things.

So look at what you're feeding on. That's the next step in the energizing factors for awakening: analysis of qualities. Where are you feeding right now? Analyze the mind's feeding habits in terms of fabrication. Remember there's verbal fabrication and mental fabrication.

Verbal fabrication is directed thought and evaluation: how you talk to yourself. The Buddha's analysis of how you talk to yourself, dividing it into directed thought and evaluation, is really useful. What topics are you choosing? Where do you focus your thinking? What have you been focusing it on? If the object of your directed thinking pulls you down, focus it someplace else. There are many levels of truth going on right now, and part of the mind will say, "What I'm focusing on is *the* real truth out there." Well, there is the real truth out there, but there are many truths out there, and there are many more truths in the mind.

So which truth right now would be energizing? Which place, when you focus your thoughts, will remind you that you've got to learn how to energize yourself. You've got to learn how to depend on yourself, to find your resources inside—they *are* there. We have good potentials, we have bad potentials, so why focus on the bad ones?

Focus on your desire to find something inside that's of real value. You can think of the Dhamma: that we have this opportunity to practice an excellent Dhamma—it doesn't come along all the time. You can think about how much you love yourself: It was because you loved yourself that you got on this path to begin with. Why would you want to stray off? You can

think about all the ajaans and other teachers you respect: What would they think if they knew that you were allowing yourself to get sluggish like this, to get dispirited like this? They'd be concerned. So allow yourself to be concerned.

And remember how they pulled themselves up by their bootstraps—or their sandal straps. Often they had things a lot worse than we have them right now, and yet they didn't let the circumstances get them down. Ajaan Mun would often remind his students, "You have what it takes. To practice, you need the body with its thirty-two parts, you need a mind that's alert and aware—and you've got that. What more do you want?"

So direct your thoughts in the right direction. And as for your sluggish-inducing thoughts, ask yourself: Why would you go for them?

This is where you look into that fivefold analysis that the Buddha recommends for anytime you're engaged in unskillful thinking: What is the origination of this? What are the instigators in the mind? Sometimes they're small, the ones that get you thinking in these ways. That's looking for the origination.

Then there's looking for the passing away. To keep in this line of thought, you have to maintain it. Otherwise, it'll just slip off on its own, drop off on its own—and yet we pick it up again.

Why are you picking it up again? What is its allure? What's attractive about this? Look around until you can find it. Often it'll be something about yourself you don't like—so you hide it from yourself. But you look at it not to get down on yourself, but to say, "Oh, I've been falling for something that's really not worth it."

You can see the drawbacks of this thinking. And you remind yourself to think in ways that give you more energy.

That induces dispassion for that thought, but it's an active dispassion. It's meant to stir you to action.

That's where the evaluation comes in: "How can I think about things in a way that will energize me, energize the mind, give it more determination to want to see things through?"

So you apply directed thought and evaluation, and then you look at the perceptions. What are the perceptions lying in the back of the mind? Again, if it's a perception of having borne up with the situation for a long time and facing a long time down the line, ask yourself, "Why do you have to hold that in mind? Can't you just be with this breath, this breath?" Here in the present moment there are opportunities. The perception of a bleak future closes off opportunities, but you can open them right *here*.

And whichever part of the mind belittles your skillful intentions in the present moment, remember that the Buddha would not think in those ways. He said that even just the intention to do something skillful, *in and of itself*, is a skillful thing. So keep giving rise to that intention, and it's in this way you can give yourself more energy to get back to the breath.

Remind yourself you can breathe in ways that give rise to rapture. It's all too easy to think sluggish thoughts when the body is feeling dry, the mind is feeling dry—so lubricate it. That was Ajaan Fuang's image. He said your mind needs rapture as its lubricant in the practice, just as an engine needs lubricant. Without it, it begins to seize up.

So breathe in a way that's really refreshing. What kind of breathing would feel good right now, really refreshing, deep down inside? Breathe that way. And whatever other chattering is going on in the mind, just keep on breathing that way. This is how you can gladden the mind, lift up the sluggish mind—stoke the fire, so that it gives more light.

And this is how we take advantage of the Buddha's teachings, and especially his statement that we suffer because of our own actions. He's saying that not to place blame on us, but to show us where the solution lies: *We can change* our actions. *We can change* the way we think, we can change the way we direct our thoughts and evaluate things, starting with mindfulness, and working up through thoughts that are energizing, ways of breathing that are energizing. That's how we can bring both the body and mind into balance—with the momentum they need to keep going on the path.