

Dr. Bokin Kim

*Material and Spiritual Balance*

Week Four: “How To Train Your Mind Muscle”

July 25, 2020



Welcome back to my final talk. This final series will focus on strengthening a weakened spirit by training the mind and the “mind muscle.”

The idea of mind muscle started in the 1990s, about 30 years ago, when I taught Buddhism and meditation at a private college in Pennsylvania. Meditation was less popular during that time. However, some students were eager to sit on the floor with their legs in the lotus position, so I instructed them on how to develop muscles for crossing their legs into the lotus position and their back muscles for sitting up straight. I taught them to focus their breathing, energy, and attention down to the *elixir field*. So I’ll just explain what I mean by the elixir field. It is located three or four fingers down from your navel. The physiology of East Asian medicine and acupuncture named the elixir field “the center for life force.” So through lower abdomen breathing, the muscle in the lower abdomen area is developed. I told my students stories about meditation practitioners who developed that muscle so well that the muscle of the area is firm and strong, like rock and iron!

So in sitting meditation, lower abdomen breathing develops a muscle in the elixir field and through this sitting meditation we cultivate awareness. In 1990, this led to my question: “Isn’t this how a muscle of awareness or awareness muscle is developed?”

In 2008, I presented the paper at the American Academy of Religion conference. Its topic was “Sitting Meditation and Cultivating Mind Muscle,” or “muscle awareness.” After my presentation, I received a question: “If the mind muscle or muscle of awareness is developed, where is it developed?” I answered, “That is also my question.”

Since then that has been my guiding question. My meeting with Richard Davidson's book, *The Emotional Life of Brain*, was a turning point, the *aha* moment! I found the book at the Philadelphia airport bookstore in 2014, two years after its publication in 2012. Richard Davidson was a devout disciple of the Dalai Lama, a practitioner, and a neuroscientist. He began his research on meditation in 1992. I confirmed while I was reading his book during my trip, “Yes, through meditation, mind muscle—the muscle of awareness—is developed. The level of cultivation is shown in the brain.” I'm going to quote Davidson’s words.

*Through mental training, you can alter your patterns of brain activity and [the] structure of your brain in a way that will change your emotional style and improve your life. I believe this is the ultimate step in mind-body interaction.*

The general understanding of the brain is that it’s static and unchanging. Davidson stated this idea of a static unchanging brain is wrong. The brain has a property called neuroplasticity, namely the ability to change its structure and function. The change occurs in response to our experience and thoughts.

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Davidson explains that the cultivation of mind muscle happens in specific parts of the brain. He matches parts of the brain with six mental functions. Sensitivity in the area of the hippocampus; awareness in the insula; intuition in the amygdala and fusiform gyrus; and resilience in the prefrontal cortex and amygdala. Furthermore, concentration and positive emotions are matched with parts of the brain. Cultivating the mind muscle strengthens the spirit.

Let's talk about that and think about the sound spirit. Spirit is defined as the state of mind which is free from discrimination and attachment. So the original mind is balanced, not tilted nor biased. Sound spirit points to a balanced mind.

I would like to use the analogy of a scale in looking at the spirit. For the scale to function properly, the scale's needle points to zero. When we measure our weight, if the needle doesn't point to zero, then that measure is not correct. Similarly, for the sound spirit, the mind should start from zero. In this way, the mind is free from any prior discrimination and fixed attachment and responds to the external conditions. So does our mind start from zero? Is our mind free from discrimination? Are we even aware of our fixed attachments, biases, or prejudices?

Here is where practice matters. Meditation develops calm, clear awareness, namely sound spirit, through strengthening the mind muscle. With a strong mind muscle, the mind responds to any sensory conditions correctly since its starting point—its default mode—is zero. From this practice, the mind is not controlled by material dominance, craving, or addiction. It is not enslaved by material dominance.

The COVID-19 crisis has given lessons and warning signals at societal and global levels to examine our materialistic culture, our capitalistic model of economy, our ecological future, and our competitive politics among nations. It calls for cooperation and collaboration globally.

As individuals, cultivating our spirituality and awareness will help us cope with our suffering and bring wisdom to our actions. Collectively, it can contribute to global healing and wisdom going forward.

We need to strengthen the weakened spirit to counter the potential enslavement of humanity. Doing this practice matters. Cultivation and training the mind is needed, and cultivating the mind muscle is the key. This way we can live a balanced life with spirituality and morality in harmony with material comfort and conveniences.

Thank you again for listening to my Dharma Talk series. Please be safe and be well.