

Your mind: use it or lose it (preventing dementia)

According to early Buddhism, the mind is the most important faculty we have. In fact, it is the most precious thing we have: it is the vehicle to awakening and true liberation. Buddhism has a lot to teach about the mind: Buddhism IS about our mind.

Experts say that if we really want to ward off dementia, we need to start taking care of our brain in your 30s and 40s, or even earlier. More than that, the Buddha teaches us that we need to take care of our mind. This is something no scientific machine can yet measure very accurately, if ever. (How do we really measure love or happiness?)

Various mental health experts have suggested some useful advice in living a full useful and happy life. Here are some tips in the light of Buddhist teachings on mental health, teaching us how to burn our candles right to the last drip of wax.

(1) Eat as you need. If we really feel our body, it will tell us what kinds of food is good for us. The Buddha's early saints ate frugally, stopping to eat just before they felt full. To prevent taking more food, they would drink some water. In other words, eat to live. Those who live to eat, generally do not live long or healthy lives.

(2) Being vegetarian is great if we are up to it. Experts tell us that the antioxidants in fruits and vegetables clear up some of the damages caused by free radicals, one of the leading killers of brain cells. The point is eat more vegetables and fruits than we do meat as far as we can. Diet alone does not make us a good or happy person.

(3) Commensal eating, to the early Buddhists, is a happy and social event. This is still a common event in Buddhist communities. Try eating at least one meal a day with family and friends. This helps us slow down our eating, and to socialize. Even if we must eat alone, the rule is to really enjoy our meal. Savour the taste and feel of every mouthful. That's mindful eating.

(4) Join a club or organization that need volunteers. Buddhist centres often need volunteers from doing something as simple as wiping the Buddha image or ushering people during weekly puja to helping in running their activities. Start volunteering right now, and we will have friends and feel needed even after we retire.

(5) Enjoy the great outdoors, especially spacious gardens, the sea-side and hills. When we find such a spot that we like, just sit for a while in complete silence, observing and absorbing the spaciousness and beauty all around. Close our eyes, imagine what we have seen. Repeat this until we can visualize that spaciousness. This is a meditation known as the perception of space.

(6) Enjoy bright spacious nature, especially during the morning hours. You might like to try watching the sun rising, and the horizon brightening up, or simply watch the spacious brightness all round. Observe the brightness, then close our eyes and visualize it. Repeat this until we can visualize the light in our mind's eye. This is a meditation known as the perception of light.

(7) Walk. The Buddha walked all his life and lived to a ripe 80 years. The early saints too were regular walkers, walking for thousands of kilometres every year all over the Gangetic plain of northern central India, teaching and meeting people, or simply meditating in beautiful nature. Daily walking helps reduce the risk of dementia by making the heart pump blood to the brain. None of the saints ever had dementia.

(8) Travel. When we travel, we work our brains to navigate new and complex environment. Experienced taxi drivers have been found to have larger brains because they have to store much information about locations and how to get there. The ancient wandering forest monks had no maps, and had to memorize their routes. They were regularly wandering, but never lost.

(9) Read and write daily or whenever you can. Reading stimulates many different brain areas that process and store information. Likewise, creative writing, even writing letters, stimulates many areas of the brain as well. What we read and write, too, should be wholesome and have a positive outlook of life.

(10) Use both hands. Using both hands works both sides of our brain. Knitting, for example, demands the dexterity of both hands. So do some computer games, but such games should not be violent or unwholesome. Practise writing with our other hand for a few minutes daily or whenever you like. This will exercise the other side of our brain and fire up those neurons before they die out like unwatered plants.

(11) Have a hobby or a few. Bird-watching, for example, gives us a gentle exercise in nature, while getting to know it better. Hobbies liven up the mind because we are trying something new and complex. The Buddha was born under a tree, awakened as Buddha under another, taught under many different trees, and passed away under two of them. He was truly a man of nature.

(12) Listen to classical music. Good music seems to work on both sides of the brain, linking the two. Listen with both body and mind. Sit comfortably and feel the flow of the music. Learning to play a musical instrument is even better. This might be harder as we age, but still it helps to develop a dormant part of our brain. Music also helps us in the perception of impermanence.

(13) Play board games. Chess, Scrabble, Cluedo and such games not only live up your brain, but also helps us socialize. Even playing solo games, such as solitaire or online computer brain games can be helpful, although the social aspect is missing.

(14) Learn a new language. Whether it's a foreign language or sign language, we are working our brain back and forth between one language and another. One of the easiest languages to learn (other than English) is Pali, the scriptural language of early Buddhism. It has a fixed vocabulary and a simple grammar. It is also a more direct way of learning some of the earliest Buddhist teachings.

(15) Take lifelong classes. Learning apparently helps us live longer because it causes physical and chemical changes in our brain. After all, the true purpose of life is to learn and grow. The body ages, but the mind goes on, life after life, and needs to keep on learning until it is really free.

(16) Silent prayer. Daily prayer with positive words and wishes empowers us. The best prayer is that of lovingkindness, which begins with wishing ourselves well and happy, and then extending this to others, until we boundlessly include everyone, even animals, without any exception. When our joy becomes truly unconditional, or peaceful enough, we simply and silently enjoy the moment.

(17) Meditate. More people, whether religious or not, are discovering the benefits and joy of meditation. Not just any meditation, but especially the Buddha's early

mindfulness methods. Meditation not only helps us deal with stress, but also opens our minds up to greater focus and creativity—and a long healthy, useful and peaceful life, heading for awakening. The Buddha declares that those who do breath meditation regularly will have a calm and clear mind right to the end.¹

(18) Get enough rest. Rest firstly means taking time away from what we do for money or for others. We need to regularly spend some quiet time just being our wholesome selves. Secondly, our body needs rest from its daily toil. If we respect our body, we will know when it needs a break. Our body will tell us how much uninterrupted sleep we need.

May our minds become clearer even as our bodies age.

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¹ <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2009/12/3.11-Maha-Rahulovada-S-m062-piya.pdf>