

Buddha's Brain Reading Guide

Chapter 1: The Self-Transforming Brain

1. How does it feel to know that you can use your mind to change your brain to change your mind for the better?
2. The author describes *virtue, mindfulness and wisdom* as the three pillars of Buddhist practice. Which aspects of your life foster these qualities and which aspects challenge them?
3. What do you think about the author's statement that, "wholesome changes in the brains of many people could help tip the world in a better direction?" Do you agree or disagree?

Chapter 2: The Evolution of Suffering

1. In what ways have you experienced separation in your life and what have the effects been? Isolation? Alienation? Overwhelm?
2. How do you relate to the three primary survival strategies – creating separations, maintaining stability, and approaching opportunities and avoiding threats - that make you suffer?
3. The author describes how our brains *simulate* the world like a mini-movie running constantly. Think of a recent occurrence when the simulator pulled you out of the present moment. What was the mini-movie that played? Did it set you chasing pleasures or resisting pains?
4. Take yourself through the self-compassion exercise beginning on page 46 and write about your experience. How does this feel for you?

Chapter 3: The First and Second Dart

1. Reflect on a recent instance when you threw a second dart. Was it to yourself or another? Was there a first dart present? Was the second dart a reaction to something that was actually good?
2. Can you identify with any of the physical or mental consequences of frequent SNS/HPSS activation (beginning on p. 56)?

Based on, and for use with *Buddha's Brain: The Practical Neuroscience of Happiness, Love and Wisdom*. Rick Hanson, Ph.D. (with Richard Mendius, M.D.) Oakland, CA: New Harbinger, 2009.

3. On page 61, the author describes the four stages on the path of awakening. Which stage do you find yourself in most often? Can you identify the second darts that keep you at a particular stage (if you're not operating at stage four – unconscious competence)?

Chapter 4: Taking in the Good

1. Which negative material in your life would you like to have infused with positive material? Look for opportunities to both have a positive experience and allow it to sink in, soothe and replace old pains; and bring to mind positive emotions and perspectives when negative material arises.
2. In your own words, describe why it's good to take in the good.
3. What are the deep roots of your recurring upsets?

Chapter 5: Cooling the Fires

1. Practice one or more of the methods for activating the parasympathetic nervous system. How does this feel in your body?
 2. On page 90, the author suggests imagining or writing down a conversation between the inner protector and a critical or alarming subpersonality, making sure that the inner protector makes a powerful case for you. How do you feel about this exercise?
 3. Are there situations in your life that you approach with similar expectations from childhood? Reflect on these situations and consider the questions that the author offers: "What options do I actually have? How could I exercise power skillfully to stick up for myself and take good care of myself? What resources could I draw upon?"
1. Complete the practice, *Exploring Your Refuges* (p. 95.) What was this experience like for you?

Chapter 6: Strong Intentions

1. Why do you think it's important to both cool the causes of suffering and warm up the causes of happiness?

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2. What is your understanding of the difference between desire and craving?
3. Complete the practice of *Many Ways to Feel Strong* (p. 105) and describe your experience. How did this exercise feel for you? In what ways do you already feel strong?

Chapter 7: Equanimity

1. What is your understanding of equanimity? In a state of equanimity, what happens when the limbic system fires?
2. Using the relaxation practices in chapter 5, make a list of mild to strong triggers and work your way up the list (from mild to strong) bringing a greater sense of tranquility to each one (p. 116).
3. How does equanimity block the normal sequence in the mind that moves from feeling tone to craving to clinging and to suffering?

Chapter 8: Two Wolves in the Heart

1. What is your understanding of how and why humans developed empathy?
2. What are some of the traits that modern day humans developed through the “banding” of early humans?
3. How did we form an “us” against “them” dynamic? How did this dynamic support survival?
4. How does the wolf of hate show up in your life? How does it feel to consciously release the thoughts of someone being “not like me?”

Chapter 9: Compassion and Assertion

1. What does empathy mean to you? Write about or discuss a recent experience of giving or receiving empathy. How did this experience feel for you?
2. On page 145 the author suggests experiencing daily compassion for five kinds of people – someone you’re grateful for, a loved one or friend, a neutral person, someone who is difficult for you, and for yourself. In what ways is this practice easy and in what ways is it challenging?

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3. Beginning on page 147, the author offers examples of unilateral virtues. What are your core virtues? What are your purposes and principles in relationships? Make a list of your unilateral core virtues (your personal code) and visualize yourself acting accordingly, no matter what happens.
4. Which of the key points of communication that the author lists are you using skillfully? Which could use more practice? How do these communication skills relate to your personal code?

Chapter 10: Boundless Kindness

1. On page 159, the author describes a meditation in which you repeat specific phrases for wishing yourself and others well, to help sink into a deep sense of loving-kindness. Describe your experience with this meditation. What sensations or emotions did you notice?
2. Of the practices the author lists to “Tame the Wolf of Hate”, which resonate with you strongly? Which do you already practice and which can you commit to practicing more often?
3. Complete the *Ten Thousand Things* exercise on page 165 and journal about your experience. How did this exercise feel for you? How has it changed your feelings or perception of the person who was the subject of the exercise? Do you feel differently about that person or the situation? Do you feel differently about yourself?

Chapter 11: Foundations of Mindfulness

1. What are your personal challenges to mindfulness, if any? Which aspect of attention is most challenging for you: holding something in your awareness, filtering out distractions, or managing the desire for stimulation?
2. Of the suggestions the author gives to support everyday mindfulness on page 184, which are you willing to commit to practicing? What practices can you add of your own?
3. The author suggests four ways to improve your attention: using intention, staying awake and alert, quieting the mind, and abiding as awareness.

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Name situations in your work and home life, and your spiritual practice in which you can use these techniques to improve your attention over time.

Chapter 12: Blissful Concentration

1. On page 198 the author offers ways to intensify rapture and joy. Having given yourself the opportunity to experiment with them in meditation and in everyday situations, describe some of your experiences.
2. Describe, in as much detail as you can, the nuances in experiencing the states of rapture, happiness, contentment, and tranquility.
3. How does it feel to give yourself over to the present moment, dropping the past and the future?

Chapter 13: Relaxing the Self

1. Recall and describe an instance in your life when your sense of "I" was strong and the cause of suffering. Conversely, describe an instance when your sense of "I" was relaxed and you felt happy and satisfied.
2. Did your understanding of the *self* change after reading the author's descriptions? How do you feel about the author's suggestions for relaxing the self: releasing identification, practicing generosity, being good to yourself, relaxing about what others think, and relaxing the desire to be special?
3. In addition to the author's suggestions for feeling joined with the world and joined with life, how will you deepen these practices to contribute to thriving, happiness and contentment for yourself and others?