Awareness of Thoughts and Thinking

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What are we doing here? That question can come up in a variety of tones of voice. It can be asked with frustration—"What am I doing here?"—or it can be a legitimate kind of curiosity. What is this? How does this practice work?

We do like to encourage you not to think too much about that, but I'm going to say a few words at the beginning here about our purpose, about what we're doing, in a simple way.

We're trying to learn about our minds. We're trying to understand ways that our mind gets caught and participates in what we call suffering, and to cultivate qualities of mind that participate in moving in the other direction—towards ease, towards peace, towards freedom.

Essentially, looking at our minds does this quite naturally. When we observe and get curious about what this experience is, whether it's something reactive or a beautiful, wholesome quality of mind, mindfulness has what seems almost like a magic property. Winnie mentioned this the other night: this ability, when we are mindful of something in a non-reactive, non-judgmental way, to transform our experience. If what we're meeting is reactive—a reactive emotion such as anger, confusion, frustration, irritation, annoyance, anything rooted in greed, aversion, and delusion—when we're mindful of that, it creates the conditions for it to diminish in our experience, to get weaker. Because we understand that it's suffering. Mindfulness and wisdom work together to help us understand that suffering, and very naturally, the mind wants to move in the direction of letting that go.

And when mindfulness meets or connects with wholesome qualities—Tara mentioned a whole list of them the other night in the paramis: generosity, energy, wisdom, patience, love, equanimity, all of the brahmaviharas, mindfulness itself—when mindfulness recognizes these wholesome qualities, it creates the conditions for them to grow stronger.

So really, all we have to do is be mindful. And very naturally, over time, the reactive things will diminish and the wholesome will increase.

Partly this happens through how we meet experience and get to know it. At first, when we are beginning either a period of practice, a retreat, or are earlier in our practice, what we're getting familiar with is what particular experience feels like—what is sometimes called the specific characteristics of experience. The body has these sensations, these qualities of pressure, heat, coolness, vibration, tingling, pulsing. Those are the specific qualities of the sensations of the body.

But every experience, no matter what is happening, has what we might call general characteristics.

Everything that happens in our bodies and minds is impermanent. It is unreliable because it's impermanent—unreliable as a source for lasting happiness. And it is not me, not mine, not who I am.

This meeting of experience with mindfulness begins to point out these general characteristics to us. We see all of these body sensations—tingling, pulsing, vibration—as impermanent. We see our mind states as impermanent. We see thoughts as impermanent, emotions as impermanent. And since impermanent, unreliable. We find we can't control what's happening. Often we see we're not in ultimate control of these body sensations. Did I decide for this tingling to happen? It happened. So we're not in control of what arises, and that points to this characteristic of not-self.

We see that every experience can reveal this to us. We don't have to wait for some special experience to notice that it's impermanent. Every experience can show us this truth. And when we see experience as impermanent, unreliable, and not-self, quite naturally our minds recognize: this is not worth clinging to. Impermanent things are not worth clinging to.

I've heard this description for a long time, and I think it came from a yogi—I can't attribute a source to it—but this yogi described suffering as being like rope burn from grasping at changing phenomena.

You know, when a rope drags through your hand, the movement of that rope burns your hand. If you let go of the rope, it stops burning. The sense of clinging to something that is impermanent creates a suffering like rope burn. And so our minds begin to understand that and start to let go—quite naturally—start to let go.

We've been exploring different phenomena in our instructions in the morning, and there's been a theme, a thread that has been carried through. When we've talked about body sensations, these are impermanent. Mind states, these are impermanent. Thoughts, these are impermanent. And so we're really learning how to meet all of these different experiences with mindfulness.

Some experiences can be more challenging than others. We tend to get caught—we each have our favorite emotions to get caught with, and certain body sensations we probably get caught with. And we all also tend to get caught with thoughts. It seems to be a human phenomenon that we get absorbed into our thoughts and spin and worry and plan. So it's human.

This morning Tara talked about working with thoughts, and I'll talk a little bit more about it tomorrow, but I thought to take a little more time to just unpack it this evening—working with thoughts, different kinds of thoughts, different ways to work with them. These are, as Tara mentioned this morning, just another experience that can be known as an impermanent, unreliable phenomenon.

Looking at thoughts also is a real pointing to that not-self quality. Because so often when a thought arises, it's kind of like, "Well, where did that come from?" It's not self. It came from conditions. It arose based on habits, patterns, things from your memory. It's just an arising that happened. You didn't try to make it happen. It just happened. And so looking at thoughts really can help us to understand this, experientially

connect with this understanding or teaching around not-self.

Sometimes people have the idea—and it can be a subtle belief or an obvious one—that what meditation means is having a mind that gets quiet, without thoughts. That sometimes happens in meditation. I think some of you have experienced it; many of you who've talked to me have mentioned that. And it's very pleasant, one of the things we like about it.

This just reminded me of a study I read. The headline was, "People would rather shock themselves than be left alone with their thoughts." People were given the opportunity to sit in a room quietly for an hour. There was a buzzer there that they could shock themselves with, or they could sit there and be with their thoughts. And people chose to shock themselves. So this is what we're dealing with—we don't like thoughts. Learning to have a more friendly relationship with thoughts can be useful.

It's possible for the mind to get quiet and not have thoughts in meditation, but that's not necessarily the goal. Our aim is this continuity of mindfulness that meets experience moment to moment and understands it as experience in the present moment—whatever it is: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, body sensations, things arising in the mind, emotions, moods, thoughts—being with moment-to-moment experience as it's arising and recognizing that it's happening right now. That's our aim in mindfulness practice. And so if thoughts arise, we can explore the possibility of being mindful of them.

Now it is challenging. Being mindful of thinking, of thoughts, is challenging because they have this quality—we are so habituated to following the thoughts, to getting caught in them, to thinking about them. That's what we've done our whole lives. So of course we get caught in thoughts. Of course. Deciding to sit down and meditate is a teaching on not-self right there. You sit down: "I'm going to meditate. I'm going to be with my breath."

You sit down determined to be with your breath for fifteen minutes. And what happens? A minute, two minutes in, you're thinking. Did you tell yourself, "I'm not going to pay attention to the breath anymore, I'm going to pay attention to thinking now"? No, it happened. It's not self.

And then, even more amazing, we're thinking, we're all lost in thought, and suddenly mindfulness returns and we become aware that we're thinking again. Did we decide to have mindfulness return? No. Again, it's not self. It arose because of conditions, because you planted seeds of mindfulness earlier. So right there, just watching the mind wander and come back—a teaching on not self.

In exploring thinking, we need to understand the difference between being lost in thought and being aware of thinking. I think we can intuitively know this because we all understand that moment when we wake up, the moment when mindfulness returns. There's a difference in quality between being lost in some story or memory and then having mindfulness return—that moment when, "Oh, aware, I'm aware." That quality of difference begins to point out what it feels like to be lost in thought and what it feels like to be aware. So getting familiar with that distinction is important.

In that moment when mindfulness returns, often what we become aware of is that we are thinking. And immediately most of us judge that: "I'm thinking. I shouldn't be thinking. I should bring myself back to the breath." But right there in that moment, you are aware of thinking. So that moment of mindfulness returning into thought is a great opportunity to recognize what it's like to be aware while thinking. Take a moment to notice that. Thinking is happening. Aware of that.

There are many different options for what to do next. It can simply be noticing the thought. But often one of my teachers, Sayadaw U Tejaniya, says what people do in that moment is they shoot the thought. "Thinking!" And then it goes away because there's such an intense focus on it. But there's a kind of intensity to that—"I'm thinking"—and it's almost like that note obliterates the thinking. It's not really a natural release of thinking. It's a kind of overwhelming of thinking through that noting process, through that intense aiming and shooting, as he says, shooting thoughts.

So when we become mindful or aware—oh, thinking is happening—can there be a gentler awareness of thinking? So that there is a connection with the capacity the mind has to think and know that we're thinking at the same time. That's what we could call mindfulness of thinking. We are thinking and we know that we're thinking.

When we are not aware of the thinking, we're often just pulled into our thoughts, our habits, our patterns, often connected to deep conditioning. Reactivity can arise. We go down a train, a rabbit hole—I sometimes call it a rabbit hole. We go down a rabbit hole and it can take us a while to come back out because there's so much conditioning around getting hooked into thoughts.

So beginning to recognize the difference between being hooked and being aware of thinking—just curiosity about that. What is that difference? And that moment when you recognize that you've become aware is a prime moment to get curious about that. Aware of thinking. It's happening. The mind can do that.

One thing I like to distinguish is that there are so many different kinds of thoughts that happen. You might have noticed that.

things like that. But there's also—you know, somebody mentioned the narration kind of thought, and then there's daydreaming kind of thoughts, and there's just drifting random thoughts. So there's a lot of different kinds of thoughts.

And roughly, in terms of talking about working with thoughts, I like to distinguish between what I'll call active or energetic thinking, where there's a kind of investment in it, maybe. There's a pull into it. There's an energy with it. I call that active thinking. And the other that I'll distinguish right now is what we might call something like drifting thinking, where there's not much of a charge. It almost just feels floaty. There's often not a lot of emotional stuff going on in there. It's just a drifty kind of space.

And there are very different ways to work with those kinds of experiences.

So I'll start with talking about the active thinking or the energized thinking, because that's often where we can struggle. That kind of thinking is often connected to an emotional pattern. And we'll talk in a moment about making those connections.

But one of the first things that can be useful with a kind of thought pattern that is really engaged is something Tara mentioned this morning, which is to kind of name it—connecting, taking a step back from the content and noticing the type of thinking in terms of a category, like planning, remembering, judging, fantasizing, arguing. It's connected to the content a little bit, but it gives you a bit of distance from the story or the narrative that's connected with the thought. So you can name or note that just very lightly. Arguing, arguing is happening. Arguing.

These kind of energized thoughts, energetic thoughts, active thinking—it kind of feels like we've been hooked onto them. So there's some engagement with them. And often it feels like, while it might have arisen unbidden, it's kind of like we've jumped on the bandwagon. Yeah, I really want to think about that.

So this kind of naming the thoughts helps us to take a step back and just notice the type of thoughts. And it also begins to point out—Jack Kornfield sometimes would say, what are your top three favorite tunes? I was the angry thinker. That was my number one hit, anger. So you begin to get familiar with the kinds of patterns, all different ways in.

I mean, some of you have talked about planning, you know, being a planner, and it's like, oh yeah, I'm planning what to have for lunch, planning how to brush my teeth, I'm planning—you know, here there's not much to plan, but we plan. So that planning is the habit. So just begin to notice the habitual qualities. This is noticing something about the specific characteristic of this kind of thinking. Planning tends to be directed at the future. Remembering at the past. So we can have different relationships with different kinds of memories in that way.

Our habitual thoughts, the ones that we find are our top three—I would say those are often related to old and deep patterns. Things that have happened to you before. Ways that you've engaged in your life from the time that you were a child. These are deeply conditioned habits. And so again, of course they arise. You can't expect to come and sit in the hall at IMS and leave your mind outside. It comes in with us. Sometimes I say on these retreats, this is your mind 101. You are learning what your mind does, how it does it.

So again, with these energetic kind of thoughts, if you find them having this, you know, naming them as planning or remembering—another piece that can be useful with these thoughts that have a lot of energy to them is just check in. Who's the audience for this thought? Am I talking just to myself, or do I have a large audience? Or is it one specific person that I am trying to convince that I'm right?

Kind of get a sense of it. Often when we're thinking, we're not just talking to ourselves—we are talking to someone. And so having a sense of that: Is there an audience? Whose voice is the thought in? Sometimes

thoughts are images. We'll talk about this more in a bit. Sometimes they're images. Sometimes they're as if we're talking to ourselves, or as if someone else is talking to us.

We might hear something in one of our parents' voice, or in an old teacher's voice, or in our boss's voice. Just notice these things. They are part of the process of how our mind does thinking. We don't have to do much other than recognize: "Okay, yeah, arguing and trying to convince this person I'm right—that's what's happening right now." Just noticing. We can notice that this is happening in our own minds.

When we're really lost in the thoughts, we believe it's happening to us right now. It's kind of startling. I got this shown to me very clearly at one point when I had had a painful breakup with someone. It was maybe a year into the breakup, and I was still processing, still dealing with this. I began noticing at times that I would wake up into thoughts and be really confused, because in the thought, I was right back in the relationship. It felt like I was there. Then I'd come out and think, "Wait a minute, that's not even—that was a year ago. That's not happening right now." It was happening in my mind.

Beginning to recognize this—naming these energetic thoughts, recognizing the audience, recognizing whose voice it's in—helps us see that this is happening in our minds. This is not actually happening.

Another useful piece here: when you notice that you're thinking, you come into awareness and recognize, "Yes, okay, I know I'm thinking, I know I'm planning, remembering, judging, fantasizing"—whatever that is. Another useful step is to take a broader view, kind of opening up a little bit and checking out: How am I relating to this fact that I'm thinking?

This is often where judgment comes in. We don't like the fact that we're thinking. The attitude to our thoughts is often related to the fact that we're practicing meditation. We're sitting down and meditating, and we have the idea, "I'm not supposed to be thinking." When thinking arises, we get annoyed with ourselves. The attitude might be annoyance. So take a moment to check out: I know that thinking is happening—what's my relationship to noticing that?

Over time it can become really neutral. It's just like, "Oh yeah, thinking is happening. That's not a problem. That's just what I can notice right now. It's another experience." But as we begin to become familiar with working with thinking, we will often see a relationship that is resistant. We don't like it. Or the other side of it might be that we just want to put down the meditation altogether and go back into that fantasy—it was way more pleasant than feeling all of this stuff in my body. So there can be both the greed, the desire to go back into the thinking, but often there's the relationship of aversion, not liking, wanting it to go away, having a conflicted relationship with it. So acknowledge that. Thinking is happening and I don't like it. That's what's happening right now.

With this active thinking, I mentioned a few moments ago that there's often emotion related to it, connected to it. Tara mentioned this morning to check in: Is there an emotion related to the thinking? Thoughts are sometimes an emotion's way of trying to get our attention.

For instance, if you're ranting at somebody—"I'm right, I'm right, you're wrong, I'm right"—maybe it just feels like judging and arguing. But what is the emotion here? It might be fear or anger, the flywheel off of which those thoughts are coming. When we can connect with an emotion, it's often already happening; it's just a little below our conscious awareness. We may not be consciously mindful or aware that those emotions are there.

Opening up to whether there are emotions present with this thought is not a trying to dig. And it's very important, I think, not to look for specific emotions. If you're having thoughts of arguing, for instance, it's not so helpful to ask, "Well, is there fear here? Is there anger here?"

But more just, what kind of emotions are here? Is there an emotion here? It's kind of opening up with that question, being available to see if there is an emotion present.

When I've explored it in this way, more than once I've been surprised by the emotion that's been there. When I'm not looking for the emotion, when I'm not thinking, "I know what the emotion should be, there must be anger under here"—if you're looking for an emotion, you may construct it and you'll find it. But if you're more just willing to let the experience show itself to you, sometimes we can be completely startled and not at all expect what is here.

I had an example of this in my daily life. I was driving, and my mind was consumed with planning—this spinning, intense energy of planning. I wanted to be present for driving, so I kept coming back to the hands on the steering wheel, trying to be present. I was skipping over the thought a little bit. I wasn't exactly pushing the thought away, but I was also not engaging with it. Just, "Okay, stop. I'm going to pay attention to driving." And it just kept coming. It was so strong. It kept coming and coming. Finally, with my hands on the steering wheel, I just said, "Well, what else is happening here?" Just that simple question—what else is going on right now with this planning? I mean, it was not pleasant. It was intense. "Got to do this, got to figure out this, got to make sure this person knows this thing and that person knows this thing."

When I stopped and just asked, "What else is happening here?"—I was really happy. I had no idea I was happy. And as soon as the mind actually opened to that, all of that planning thought went away. In retrospect, what I saw was happening was that the mind was trying to figure out how to hold on to this happiness. How can I make sure that everybody knows everything they need to know so that I can feel this happiness—when I wasn't even feeling it?

So opening to that curiosity, to what is here, can be so surprising. In the middle of being curious about depression and depressed thoughts, I noticed mettā. That was... what? And again, it was just an opening to "what else is here?" Oh, there's mettā here. Not at all what I expected. There can, of course, be—in the middle of arguing and frustration thoughts—anger and hatred and all of those things. But I just want to point out: don't look for anything in particular. Just be curious about what shows up, and then work with it as we've talked about working with emotions in the body, being with it in the body.

Often when we connect with the emotion that's underlying thoughts, the thoughts will dissipate. Because as I said, it's like the thoughts are often, in this kind of energetic experience, the emotion's way of trying to get our attention. So when we finally connect—"Oh, this is what's happening"—the thoughts may dissipate.

In trying to be aware, mindful of extremely strong thoughts, these energetic patterns with a lot of emotional charge to them, it's helpful to really have the wisdom to understand whether or not the mindfulness can actually meet the experience. Sometimes the energy of a reaction, a thought and the emotion with it, can have more momentum than our mindfulness has momentum. And it feels like our little stream or trickle of mindfulness is swamped by a tsunami. If trying to be mindful of a pattern like that just pulls you right back into it, if you're just swamped by the energy of the emotion, then that's not the time to try to be mindful of that pattern.

There's a number of things we can explore in that moment. It's not what we would call pure mindfulness, but it's skillful means to support us to stay present rather than getting lost. An important part of this is that we're letting go or redirecting the attention to something else. But it's important to do that in a way that's not a repression of that strong energy, the strong thought, the strong emotions with it—to not be repressing that.

It's more like what I would do at times. Anger was my big thing. I would get lost in worlds of anger. And as I began to practice with it and notice how strong it was, notice that I couldn't quite be mindful of it in that moment, it would be like I would bow to it. I'd say, "I see you."

I see you're really asking for attention, but mindfulness isn't quite strong enough at this point, so I'm going to turn my attention to something else. That was the whole conversation I would say to myself a few times, and then it just translated into "not now" with a very gentle tone, so that it had no aversion in it. Just "not now." And then I turned my attention to something else.

There are different ways to turn our attention. Depending on how strong the energy is, it might be that you can just let that energy still be there but expand, and let yourself know there's lots of other things happening in the present moment. Just remind yourself there are thousands of things happening in the present moment other than this thing. Sometimes it can feel like we're pulled by a magnet to pay attention to something that's very painful, very difficult. And just the reminder: yeah, that's happening. And seeing is happening. Hearing is happening. Well, there's that thing again. And seeing is happening. And hearing is happening. And there's sensations on my feet. And oh, there it is again. And seeing is happening.

I would rotate through my senses and just broaden to expand the field of attention. Rather than being collapsed in on this one thing, it just got broader. You can also just redirect the attention, turn to something else. That can be a little harder if it's got that really strong magnetic pull to it. But if you can—and I did that with the anger—I said "not now." I was often walking when this happened for some reason. Anger would take over when I was walking. And so I would acknowledge the anger and I would

say, "Well, you can take a walk with me, but I'm going to pay attention to my feet." That was a way to just redirect. I wasn't attending to it at all, but I also didn't tell it it had to go away. So these are gentle ways to hold these challenging emotions and turn the attention elsewhere.

Now, if these emotions are really strong, often they're felt in this area—in the torso, throat, chest, stomach. Powerful emotions often have sensations in this area. And so for myself, I found coming back to the breath was not always useful in this kind of place, in terms of redirecting the attention. Because of all of that tension associated with those emotions in the body, as soon as I tried to be with a breath, all of it would be clenching. It just reminded me of it and I was right back in it. That may or may not be the case for you, but give yourself permission to not necessarily come back to your breath if it's your anchor. Let yourself broaden with some challenging emotional states. Broader awareness, or turn to hearing. Hearing can be great there because it's not in this area of the body, that experience of hearing.

I have lots more I could tell you about working with difficult thoughts, but I want to get to drifting thoughts, so I'll shift in that direction.

These kinds of thoughts are much less energetic, and often actually some of these thoughts come when the energy is a little low or when the mindfulness is a little weak. These kinds of daydreams, random thoughts that seem—you find yourself seeing images or thinking about people you don't know. They're talking about things you're not interested in. It just seems random. There's not a lot of emotional connection either. It's just like, why am I hearing people talk about that? Something in your mind is making connections and you're aware of it.

Often I have found for myself that when that kind of thinking is happening, and it feels like a drifting or a daydreaming quality, or maybe you're even seeing images, dream-like images—those are also thoughts. What I like to suggest is this: you can use the noting if you like, you can explore "daydreaming is happening, drifting is happening." But what I find most useful for myself in that space is to connect with and become aware of the quality of the mind that is drifting. It's often quite relaxed, quite spacious, and quite non-reactive. It's just not quite mindful.

So we're bringing, essentially—that state is candy. If just a little bit of mindfulness is brought in there, it can open us to a relaxed, open, nonjudgmental, aware space. So with that drifting thought, that's often one of the first things I encourage people to check. Can you know the quality of the mind that is drifting or daydreaming?

Touch into that. And then potentially use the noting for that quality—spacious, calm, peaceful, relaxed. Touch into the quality of the mind there, rather than the fact of the thinking. Because the thinking there is not so interesting. It's just the mind relaxing and doing its random brain-firing things. It's not something that's often terribly relevant for us. But the quality of that mind is really useful. We can connect to it and find... I have found at times when I connected to that, it's like feeling the mind dropping into a completely new terrain of awareness—broad, spacious, relaxed, and receptive.

We can also, in this time or place where there's not so much charge to thinking, be curious about and recognize how the thinking is happening in our minds. Tara mentioned this also this morning—that we essentially can think in any of our sense modalities. Seeing and hearing are two of the biggest ones. We often will see images here, or hear our thoughts as if somebody is talking to us, like it's a radio. So we're talking to ourselves. It comes in through an imagined hearing and an imagined seeing as our thoughts.

But we can also think in all of our sense modalities. I have at times experienced having scents or smells come in, very rarely tastes, but I've had that occasionally. And then, more often for me—I was a dancer—a memory of movement, the feeling... we can have kinesthetic thoughts. To give you a flavor of that right now, being with yourself, imagine that you're going to stand up. Is there any sense—some of you may have felt this—when I do this, sometimes I have a sense of that feeling of the movement, almost. If you just imagine, "I'm going to stand up," it can almost feel like the standing has happened and you haven't stood. That may give you a clue of what a kinesthetic thought would be like.

So we can think in all these different modalities. And sometimes it's useful to acknowledge, as a part of recognizing the process of thinking, how the mind is doing its work. It's not the content we're interested in here so much as how the mind is thinking. It's thinking by creating images. It's thinking by creating sounds. I would sometimes use the note for the sense modality to notice the thought. Rather than noticing "drifting" or "thinking," I would notice "seeing." This is a seeing thought. I knew I wasn't really seeing, but it was acknowledging that the thinking was happening through that sense modality.

This was really helpful at one point. During one of my three-month courses, I think I watched every movie I've ever seen—including seeing the titles in the font they were in in the movie. As soon as I saw an image arise from those movies, I would note "seeing," and then it would vanish. And then I might see another. This got to be pretty fun, actually, because I could watch a movie in about seven seconds. It would produce the image, I'd note "seeing," and that one would vanish. Then another frame would appear, half an hour later in the movie, and "oh, seeing," and that one would vanish. I would just watch these thoughts arise and vanish. Again, just watching them, noticing them, not having a conflicted relationship with them.

In talking about the noticing—for instance, with the drifting thought, noticing the quality of the mind—what's the quality of the mind that's thinking? That's noticing, in a way, how the thinking is affecting experience. In this case, it's almost more that the thinking is a byproduct of something else that's happening. The mind has relaxed, it's become spacious and calm, and there's not enough mindfulness, so random thoughts appear. So we're noticing what's going on with the thoughts. Thoughts are happening—and what else is happening with the thoughts? That's a good general tool.

What else is going on while this thought is happening? How does thinking affect experience?

Thinking is a powerful conditioning force in our minds. When thoughts arise—and we often think of emotions as coming up first and then thoughts following—but thoughts can also arise first. We can be in one of those random, drifty spaces and because of association, stumble into some thought that reminds us

of somebody we had a conversation with, and then we're back in that argument with them. So it was kind of like we drifted out of mindfulness. It wasn't like there was a lot of emotion, but the thought arose and then we started having that argument, and that thinking generated emotion.

So there's a cycle between thought and emotion, thought and emotion. And generally being curious about what else is happening with the thinking begins to unpack or unweave some of what has been conditioned by thoughts and some of what the thoughts might be conditioning.

Sometimes I call this noticing—like when you wake up into thinking. I talked about this at the very beginning: when you notice that thinking is happening, take the opportunity to recognize, "Oh, I'm aware of thinking. Here it is." As opposed to immediately, "Oh, thinking, let me come back to the breath." There's something that's happened there. While you've been wandering, something has been shaped. Thinking has shaped your experience in some fashion. And so see if you can take that in. I sometimes call this noticing the landscape that you're waking up into. Or notice the planet that you're waking up on.

It may be that the thought you're waking up into has shaped an emotion of anger, fear, confusion. It also may be that the thought has shaped some wholesome qualities. This was another really big aha moment for me around working with thoughts—just being curious about, okay, what else is here with this thought? Like that happiness, you know? Like a wholesome quality of happiness.

I was having a lot of thinking about some friends. I was sitting right about there on a three-month course and thinking about friends from the Peace Corps. They were coming up repeatedly in my mind. "Yep, thinking, come back to the breath." Doing that, shooting the thoughts as Sayadaw Tejaniaya was talking about. "Thinking, come back to the breath." It's like, "They're not here. Go away. Breath. Breath." And it was so potent though. It was such a strong pull. They kept coming back.

And finally, it's kind of like—you know what happens when you surrender? It just is so much easier. It's like, okay, this is what's happening. What else is here? It was mettā. And I was like, "Oh, wow." Just this expansive quality of feeling, "I love you." The thoughts stopped. And the mettā remained.

So what planet is actually there with the thoughts? I often find that we think we can set it aside and come back, but it's more like an aikido move. Open to what's here and connect with it. And see what happens next.

There are a couple of other kinds of thoughts that I'll mention briefly, just to touch on them. And if these are happening for you, you can check in with the teacher you're meeting with.

This morning somebody mentioned narration as a kind of thinking. In addition to how Tara talked about it, I find sometimes that narration happens and it's just a really neutral thing, you know. It's just like I'm walking down the hallway and I go into the bathroom and turn on the light, and the mind is saying, "She's walking down the hall. She went into the bathroom. She flipped the light switch. She thought about telling Joseph about this experience." Just a continual narration of what was happening. It drove me nuts for a

while. And I think really it's just an experience that we seem to do. We tell ourselves the story of "me" constantly all day long. And at certain points in the meditation, it becomes obvious that this is happening.

A way to work with that narration, at least for me, is to really acknowledge the not-self nature of it. I couldn't stop it. That's a useful exploration around not-self—can I make this not happen? Can I turn this off? No. Okay, it's not-self. It's a process that's unfolding, and what I can do is be aware of it. So that narration can be worked with in that way.

Another kind of thought—almost not a thought, not a thought in the way we normally think of thoughts at least—are the deeper perspectives we carry: views, beliefs. These are a kind of thought in a way. Beliefs are a kind of thought. They're not often consciously recognized because they are a perspective we're looking through. We're not really knowing that we believe something—it's just true.

One way to begin exploring this area is when there's some kind of struggle, where it feels like you're caught. You're aware of it, you know you're caught, but you just keep staying caught. You can keep working with it in that way, but sometimes it can be useful—because when we're caught like that, there is some kind of belief happening. A little bit of curiosity, "What's being believed right now?" can sometimes allow that belief to bubble into consciousness so we can become aware of it.

With beliefs, they aren't exactly on or off. We have ranges of beliefs. Sometimes when a belief is exposed, when it comes up, it's like, "Wow, I don't even believe that." We're not trying to stop believing or stop the beliefs, but just to see them. Sometimes when those beliefs come up and they're not really believed anymore, it's like, "That's an old belief. I don't believe that anymore." Those old beliefs can operate below the surface because of their habitual conditioned nature, but when they're exposed, they can sometimes just release.

Then there are those beliefs we're really on board with. That one comes up—"I'm to blame"—and yep, I'm on board with that. So just notice: if you see a belief, you can be curious about how strong it is. You don't have to stop believing it. Those strong beliefs will not go quietly, but they may be willing to be seen.

There can be a kind of release or relief when we see something—that whole pattern of struggle and confusion, and then to see, "Oh, I think I'm to blame here. Yeah, actually, I think I'm to blame here." The mind can relax a little when it sees what's actually going on. Even if there's still a sense of that being believed, when it's exposed to mindfulness, there can be that sense of, at least it's being seen. Maybe there can be an okayness about knowing that. Like Bruni mentioned the other night—"I don't like this." Yep, that's what's happening. I don't like this. And the heart can go, "Yeah, oh, it actually feels good to be acknowledged." I don't like this. Yes.

So beliefs can be really helpful to explore, especially when we're caught in something. The belief won't always show up, but you could just give yourself that opportunity: What's being believed here?

So that was a lot. Sometimes my teacher Sayadaw U Tejaniya would say, just let the talk—you don't have

to try to remember it. Let the talk be like dharma rain, just raining into your system. The rain falls and goes into nooks and crannies, just filters in through the soil. At some point, some piece of that rain may nourish the understanding of something. And you don't have to go looking for it. So you don't have to remember anything I said.

But at some point when you're working with something, it might arise—oh, beliefs. So just trust that process.

Let's sit for a moment. Trusting the process. Opening to just how it is. Appreciate yourself for what you're doing. And if it feels hard to do that, borrow my appreciation. It's an amazing thing that you're doing.

Thank you for your practice. Thank you for listening.

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