Mindfulness of Thoughts

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This morning, for the instructions, I'd like to offer some reflections on working with thoughts and thinking.

Last night in talking about the wandering mind, I didn't really so much talk about working with thoughts themselves, but more about noticing the edges of the wandering mind—noticing when and how the mind returns from wandering and how it slips out into wandering.

With the wandering mind, thoughts are often a part of that experience of the mind going off. Not always. Sometimes the mind, as I said last night, can wander into states of calm or non-thought. But often thoughts are a part of the wandering mind and can pull us out of mindfulness.

But thoughts don't have to pull us out of mindfulness. They're just another object, just another experience. The eye sees, the ear hears, the mind thinks. We can be aware of seeing and hearing, and we can be aware of thinking. Yet we have a strong habit of not being aware of thinking. We have a strong habit of getting caught or pulled into the content of thinking, what we are thinking about, as opposed to recognizing that we are thinking. And so this is actually an important part of our learning in mindfulness practice—to learn how to become aware while thinking.

An important understanding or recognition around thinking is the distinction between the content of the thought, what we are thinking about, and the process, the fact of thinking, the experience of thinking.

It's often helpful in our meditation to acknowledge in a light way some aspect of the content of thinking, rather than the detail of the thinking. This is often an early instruction. I know you've probably all heard this instruction: when you notice that you're thinking, acknowledge the type of thinking—planning, remembering, judging, fantasizing. This is a way to begin to step us out of the detail of the content to just acknowledge the flavor of the content. It's like one step back from being in the content, where we can acknowledge, "Oh, this is the kind of thinking that's happening."

When our thoughts are really strong, there's often a strong emotional pull underneath. That emotional pull can take us into the content. The kind of dynamic between emotion and thought seems pretty habitual for us in our minds—when there's a strong emotion, we get pulled into thought about what the emotion is connected to, thinking or believing in a way that the thinking part of it is going to help us navigate the feelings. And so when there is strong thought, when we feel really strongly pulled into the content of the thought, it can be really helpful to check in: Is there an emotion connected with it? This is again a way to step back from the content of the thought, the words, the meaning, the story or narrative,

and become aware of the emotions connected to the thought. So again, we're stepping back from the direct content of the thought here.

At times when we notice thinking, it may not feel like the content is particularly relevant. The thoughts seem random or maybe dreamlike images, or just some memory that flits through but there's not a particular charge to it. And there it can be really interesting to step more fully back from content and be curious about how the thinking is happening. This gets more into the process of thinking.

Thinking as a phenomenon can be experienced through many sense modalities. Often the most familiar way we first recognize thinking, for many of us, is as if we're talking to ourselves. So it's coming in through almost the hearing door—it's like an internal experience of hearing. Or we might experience thoughts as images. I didn't think I thought with images until I started meditating. Then I began clearly recognizing this. I think one of the first times this was really clear, I was sitting meditating and I saw this image of being in a place I was traveling, seeing the detail of this building, this place that I was at, and recognizing, "Oh, that's a thought. That image is a thought."

So thoughts actually can come in through any of our sense modalities. We can experience thinking through the avenue or inner sense of hearing or seeing, and sometimes even smelling. I've experienced that rarely, but it has happened. And there also can be a kinesthetic experience of thinking. This one I knew from being a dancer. I was a dancer when I was younger, and when I closed my eyes to envision the dance, I would feel it—as if the body were doing it. That's a kind of thinking.

Sometimes it can be useful or interesting to step back from the content of the thinking and recognize how the thinking is happening—what the sense modality is. For myself, I would acknowledge this with a light note. Instead of simply acknowledging it as "thinking," I would acknowledge it as "seeing" or "hearing." I knew I wasn't really seeing or hearing in the external sense, but it seemed helpful to recognize that this was thinking happening in a particular modality. So it's a recognition of thinking as process—how the mind is thinking rather than what the mind is thinking about.

To me, this particular way of acknowledging thinking seems most easy and most appropriate when there's not a lot of emotional content or stickiness to the thinking. Although sometimes it can actually help to diminish the stickiness if we acknowledge, "Yep, this is just the mind thinking through this, telling myself a story."

There's a particular kind of thinking that most meditators stumble into at some point, and that's the almost dreamlike experience. You're not asleep because you're not falling over, but the mind is in this kind of state where it's producing dreamlike images—random, almost nonsensical images. Those I find really useful to acknowledge with the recognition of seeing: "Seeing" or "Images are happening." And again, in the exploration of this as a process, we don't have to stop it. We can simply know that it's happening.

Last night I talked about beginning to recognize states that we habitually get lost in—spaciness, sleepiness, fogginess, dullness. This dreamlike state is one of those that the mind can be very relaxed and receptive to, but not quite present. The state itself is not inherently non-mindful. It's more of a habit of not being mindful. And so the gentle recognition of "Oh yeah, images are happening" can shift something. Then you may begin to be able to recognize or touch into the state of mind—the soft, relaxed state of mind that is happening in conjunction with those dreamlike images.

One last piece I want to share about thoughts in terms of exploring with curiosity, investigating thought: this is again part of exploring the process of thinking—to begin to recognize the conditioned nature of thinking.

One of the easiest ways to recognize this is to notice the pattern between emotions and thoughts. Thoughts arising in the mind can generate an effect in the experience of the body. The thought arises, and then there's how that thought lands. That's a really interesting exploration. Thinking's happening—how is the body responding to that? Noticing the conditioning nature of that process in the mind.

A thought arises. You're sitting, minding your own business, and a thought arises—not random, because thoughts are not random—perhaps about a friend or a partner. That particular image or memory is about a time where there was a charged experience between the two of you. What happens? That thought has arisen, and then often the body and emotional tone respond. Those emotions, that charge—again, the conditioned nature of thought.

And thought can also be conditioned by emotions. An emotion can arise, a feeling based perhaps on some experience of the body. A pain in the body can arise, and then there's a little bit of resistance, a little bit of aversion, and then the mind starts thinking about it. Again, the conditioned nature of thought.

Just noticing this as a pattern, independent of the content—this is how the thought-emotion-thought cycle happens.

Sometimes too we can notice that sense impressions will generate or condition thoughts. We hear something—the sound of a bird. We recognize it as a bird. Then we may notice that recognition itself is a subtle kind of thought. That perception, that recognition, can be understood as a subtle kind of thought. It may be seen as an image of a bird, or the mind may say "bird," may actually name it without your doing the naming. That's a thought arising. And then we might start thinking about the bird. What kind of bird is it? Is it that kind or that kind? So the arising of a sense impression can also be how the process of thinking unfolds.

Some curiosity around the process of thinking.

So let's settle in to the experience. Thoughts are going to happen most likely during the sitting at some point. I'm not going to lead or guide a particular meditation around exploring thought, but as you're practicing, as you're sitting, when you notice that thinking is happening...

Be curious about it in these ways that I've described. If there's a content or an emotional tone to it, notice the emotion that's connected with it. Perhaps notice the content, the flavor of the content, or maybe notice the modality—how the thinking is happening.

So connect to your experience and allow the body to relax. Maybe there's a sense of allowing the mind to relax. I often find it helpful to see if there can be a relaxation deeply, more deeply inside the body. Perhaps the inside of the throat can relax. Maybe the heart can relax. Maybe the stomach and the intestines can relax.

And if you are using an anchor for your attention, allow the experience of the anchor to come to you, settling back and receiving that home base experience—body, hearing, breath.

And when you notice, as you inevitably will at some point, that thinking is happening—or that you're waking up and thinking has been happening—bring some curiosity to noticing that experience of thinking.

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