Awareness with Thoughts and Thinking

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Awareness with Thoughts and Thinking

We'll start with just noticing how you are in this moment. Just acknowledging: this is how the experience is.

And remembering that relaxation is so helpful for supporting a quite natural capacity to be aware. You could start with some relaxation of body, consciously scanning the body and relaxing, softening the muscles of the body.

I also find it helpful at times, rather than consciously doing a scan and exploring a conscious relaxation, to just invite—drop in an invitation for the body to relax. And then just see how the body and mind respond to that invitation.

May the body relax.

I often find that just dropping that invitation in and being available to see how the body and mind respond, some aspect, some area releases that I wasn't even aware was held.

May the body relax.

May the mind relax.

Not trying to do it or figure out how it might work for the mind to relax. Just dropping that invitation in.

May the mind relax.

Turning the attention towards recognizing awareness. Are you aware? What is obvious? What is awareness naturally already connecting with? That may be body sensation. Maybe sound. Emotions or moods.

Are you aware? What is obvious?

What is obvious moment to moment may change, will change. Whatever the object is itself may shift and change—pitch and tone of sound, body sensation pulsing, fluctuating. And the attention may also shift to some entirely new experience. The curiosity about that shift of attention, and not needing to stop it, just taking in whatever the attention is naturally and easily connecting with right in this moment.

From time to time, checking, being curious about the attitude, the relationship to experience. Do you want

something to happen? Moving towards a wanting? Do you want something to stop happening? Pushing away? There may be ideas or beliefs present. It should be this way, it should be that way. Or it may be okay.

And keeping the practice simple: Are you aware?

What's being received? What is awareness already aware of?

Awareness will get lost. Our habit of being pulled into the content of thinking is quite strong. And at some point there will be recognition—awareness will return. Notice in that moment, often we are already connecting to "I've been thinking." But can you recognize, or be curious about, the return of awareness itself? Aware again, in that moment.

Because thoughts are such powerful shapers of experience, there's value in a curiosity about how having been lost in thought has affected the present moment experience. Often in the return—that recognition of being aware again—the content itself fades a little bit, but the impact of having been thinking lingers. What is here now?

I sometimes think about, or have the idea or image, that being lost in thought is like being on another planet. The mind makes a whole world in its thoughts. And when we come into awareness, we are waking up into that space. So it's kind of like: what planet am I on right now, as awareness returns? Often that planet has been shaped by the thoughts, perhaps with emotions or moods. So maybe it's planet frustrated. Or maybe it's planet calm. Sometimes when our minds wander into thoughts, it doesn't always construct reactivity—it sometimes can construct ease and calm. That can be surprising to notice. So if you're not reacting to the fact of having been wandering, you might notice surprising things upon the return of mindfulness.

Are you aware? What is obvious?

As we become aware of thinking, we might notice there are different ways that we think. Sometimes it feels like our thoughts charge us out of the present moment—there's a lot of pull to the content, a lot of emotional investment. And sometimes our minds drift out of the present moment, not so much with investment in the content, but more almost dreamlike images, or just random thoughts. I'm just describing things I've noticed here. We're not looking for anything, but you may recognize when you notice thinking that there are these different kinds of flavors of thought.

When there's that more emotional tone to the thinking, it's really helpful to notice the effect. As you wake up into thinking, we may have a habit of noticing "thinking" and then trying to come back to some kind of experience, like the breath, or come back to something that's not the thinking. And while attending to the content of the thoughts itself may not be so useful, there's a kind of place in between—noticing that the thinking, that the contents, have had an effect. That effect is already here.

So when there's this waking up with thinking: what's here? It's the same instruction. What's obvious? Just different ways of describing the different kinds of experiences we might have. What's obvious in this moment, as we've been lost in thought? What planet have I woken up on? Planet calm, planet frustration, planet anger, planet confusion. What is the space that you're already in? What's here?

When there's more of a drifting out of the present moment, when it's not so much an emotional connection or tone, often the content doesn't pull us so much. It's more the quality of the mind that's the space we've ended up in. So it's still useful to check: what's that space like? One thing we may notice in waking up with those kinds of thoughts is how the mind is thinking. I sometimes call this the modality of thought.

We can think in almost all of—I'd say we probably can think in any one of—our sense modalities. We often think as if we're hearing ourselves or talking to ourselves, through the sense door of hearing. We often think through imagery, seeing. We can also think through a kinesthetic experience, a sense of the feeling of something. I used to be a dancer, and that was how I thought about my dances—the feeling of what it was like. So there's that possibility too.

So when there's less of a charge or pull—more of that drifting out of the present moment—sometimes we might notice that the mind has been thinking in one of these ways. I've found it useful to simply notice: oh yes, there's been imagery, or there's been the experience of talking to myself.

But again, it's really useful to notice the quality of the mind that has been thinking, because often in that space of drifting out of the present moment there is more calm or ease. Sometimes I've found that after waking up, if I'm not judging myself for having been lost in thought—if it was one of those spaces of drifting—there can be more ease in the waking up than there was before the mind wandered. Just that curiosity of "what's here now?" can reveal this. And sometimes it is reactivity. So simply noticing that, looking at the quality of the mind that has been thinking—it can be surprising. Maybe it's joy. Maybe it's happiness. Maybe it's mettā.

Often when we're lost in thought, we are drawn to the content of thought. In formal sitting, this exploration around "what's the quality of the mind that's thinking?" is really helpful—not attending too much to what the content is. And yet, in our lives we need to think, and we can be aware with thinking.

As I said last night, the attempt to be aware of thinking by looking at it often doesn't work—it will often make the thought go away. The kind of awareness that allows us to be aware with the thought is this more receptive awareness, a broader awareness. That kind of awareness can know the content of the thought, can know how that content affects you, can know how it might play out—the shaping of how that thinking might unfold. It can notice the body sensations that are happening with that thought. That broad awareness can know all of this together.

This is a learning, a process of exploring what it means to be aware with thinking. There's often such a

habit of aiming or directing the attention that we don't have the opportunity as much to have that space of broad awareness that's just noticing the thoughts happening.

As I mentioned last night, one place where you can begin to recognize that you can be aware with the content of thought is in that moment when mindfulness returns while thinking. Because often in that place there is awareness and thinking at the same time. And it's because that kind of awareness returning is receptive awareness—it's first receptive before we pick it up and then start to direct.

That moment of mindfulness returning—there's so much to learn there about how broad awareness feels, about the effortless quality of awareness, about the nature of how awareness receives experience. That moment is so instructive, if we're not judging ourselves for the mind being lost. When I began to see the value of that moment, it did not matter how many times my mind wandered. I got so interested in that moment of mindfulness returning, in what I was learning there. There's so much to see in that moment.

So there was a question—and I want to keep this somewhat brief; I sometimes do a longer dharma talk on this topic, so this will be an abbreviated version. The question was: "Can you distinguish attention from awareness in this tradition? Is it the difference between seeing and looking? Manasikāra versus sati, with examples."

Attention is a function of mind. My sense of what attention does is it chooses something out of experience to connect with. It's the factor of mind that, we could say, decides what awareness is connecting with. It is different from the factor of sati, of mindfulness.

We can know this through a simple reflection. If you're wandering around lost in thought, not mindful—and we've all experienced this, walking down the street completely lost in our thoughts, not aware—you are still walking through the world, still seeing and hearing, not walking into things, not stepping in front of cars. Something is processing. Seeing and hearing are still happening, and something is attending to that. So attention is working even when we're not mindful. That's one way we can see that mindfulness and attention are not the same thing.

And yet what I didn't understand initially about mindfulness was that I thought when I was mindful, it meant that I was choosing what to be mindful of. This is an interesting feature about attention. Attention is a factor that—kind of like the way our breath works...

We can either choose to breathe consciously—breathe in, breathe out—or we can forget about breathing altogether and breathing will happen on its own. Attention is kind of like that. We can choose where to place our attention, and if we are not choosing where to place it, the attention will be somewhere nonetheless.

Many forms of mindfulness practice work by cultivating mindfulness through choosing what we are attending to—choose to attend to the breath, for instance. This form of mindfulness is more interested in not choosing, but rather seeing that process of attention do its thing. Attention will be picking something

out of experience.

Now, we might think of attention as being something specific. But attention can be specific and focused, or attention can be noticing broader, more diffuse experience. Sometimes the attention is connecting to a space or the quality of the mind as opposed to something specific—a sensation in the body, an experience, or a sound.

I used to think that if I wasn't choosing what to attend to, then I wasn't being mindful. This practice works counter to that assumption. We are simply exploring where the attention already is, with awareness.

So you have some days of practice here without our words to bother you. The rest of today and tomorrow—we won't be here in the morning tomorrow, but you're welcome to come and sit together during this time. We'll start the groups on Monday.

There was a question about whether it's okay to lie down in the hall. We generally encourage that only if you have a physical need. For me, with this body, I pretty much do exclusively lying meditation. I know there are some bodies that need to do that in the still posture. But it's not something to do in the hall simply because you're tired of sitting and want to lie down.

What we will do is set up a space with a couple of zabutans, and we'll put a sign on it indicating that it's a shared space for occasional lying posture. You're always welcome to do your lying meditation or any meditation in your rooms as well. That's mostly what I choose to do.

When I'm doing lying meditation, there are times when the mind gets into spaces that are so quiet that it's very close to sleep. I can kind of come in and out of sleep and see that happening. And when I fall asleep, I snore. Sometimes I actually hear the snoring—"What's that sound? Oh yes, that's me snoring." I don't want to have that happening in the hall, so I choose primarily to practice in my room, especially when the mindfulness gets more continuous, more stable, more settled.

It's fine to do the lying practice in the hall. If you've not done a lot of it, you can talk to me about how to approach it. The one key trick I use if I feel I'm in the hall and maybe in danger of falling asleep is putting my arm at right angles to the floor. You need some kind of feedback. If you fall asleep, your arm will drop. Now, you may not always notice that it drops, but when you wake up, you will know that it has dropped and therefore know that you have fallen asleep. This is important because in the lying posture, it's possible to fall asleep and wake up feeling like it's been continuous mindfulness, not knowing that you've actually drifted off. So you need some feedback.

Enjoy your days.

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