Awareness with Thinking

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 42:28

So I wanted to just say a few things this afternoon about awareness with thinking.

We've talked about it a bit. Alexis brought it up this morning. Of course, the thought process is certainly one of the more significant experiences that we could possibly be aware of, right? Takes up a lot of airtime, doesn't it, in your practice? You wish it didn't.

How much of the suffering that we're experiencing in our practice here, on a moment-to-moment basis—the discontent or dis-ease—is connected with thought, with thinking? It can be so frequent, especially if you're new to this style or new to practice at all. The idea is so common that if we're doing well, we're getting to a point where we're not thinking, or hardly thinking at all. And that peace is really about not having thoughts.

Which, I mean, in one way that's true, right? When there aren't a lot of thoughts and we're aware, it is peaceful. But that's not like the peace to end all peace. That's a condition.

I remember many years ago, I read a short statement from Dilgo Khyentse Rinpoche. He said, you know, when we really look at the nature of a thought, what is it? It's like poof. It's so nothing. And so therefore there's no logical reason why thoughts should bother us so much and we get so caught up in them. That part wasn't so helpful, right?

But it's actually quite fascinating once we begin to—as we continue to for our whole life and practice—include thinking as the sixth sense door and bring in awareness with the quality of curiosity, that receptive curiosity that Alexis was talking about today, really just exploring what it is. It can be fascinating. And also, it's incredibly revealing, almost amazing, when the shift happens in one's experience—from being really in the thought, where the thought describes the world, describes us, and we don't think of it as describing reality but as actually being reality, even though the reality of one moment is completely different from five minutes later, we're caught, we're totally caught—the shift from that to recognizing, "Oh, a thought is a thought." It's world changing.

The same story can be going on in my mind, and I think, "Oh yeah, that's thinking." It's completely different from the believing.

So just to begin to explore, to continue to explore—it's quite fascinating. When I was doing a self-retreat for a few weeks earlier this winter, I was somewhere not home and practicing in this style, meaning being with awareness and not having a really rigid structure at all, just being aware with whatever was going on, all the sixth sense doors as we've described. And for some reason, just the interest was piqued in

exploring thought more.

What piqued it was I was noticing, as I'm walking around, or I'm doing the dishes, or sitting, or whatever, all the sixth sense experiences are occurring, correct? You're seeing, you're hearing, there are physical sensations, maybe not as much taste and smell, but some, and thinking. And I started to notice, in terms of receptive awareness rather than planning, how much more priority or importance my mind or my attention was giving to thinking than it was to hearing or seeing. Thinking—that's the real thing, which was causing immense suffering. But that's the real thing. And I could see, oh, that's the habit.

So you're doing the dishes. And even if we think we're being mindful, we're thinking about doing the dishes. And sometimes, when we see this with awareness, it's fun to see. But then when you think about how much it's happening, sometimes the thinking about doing the dishes—it's almost like we take that for the reality. More in touch with the thinking about doing the dishes than just the simplicity of the sensations.

That is a simple example. But I've been exploring thought for years, and this was just a piece I hadn't seen: a sense of prioritizing the thought door as more important than any other sense door. In other words, that was more me. Let's face it, when it's important, why is it important?

Because somehow it's about me. It's creating a sense of me. Or I don't like it, or I do like it—that's creating the sense of me.

There is hearing, the beautiful birds, peace. Okay, that's nice. But what about me? Let's think about something. That's what the mind does. It's more interesting. We'd rather think ourselves into a suffering story about me than just rest at ease with seeing and hearing and thinking and sensing.

But I'm not getting anywhere with this. What can I do to make it a little more interesting? What can I do to get somewhere? What can I compare it to? What does this mean about me?

Nothing. And we hate that.

So first, noticing how—and it may not be true for you; we're all different, I'm not saying we all prioritize thought—but it was just interesting for me to see how somehow I gave thought more reality. And what's so interesting is it actually has less reality, the content.

When we're not recognizing thought energy as a thought, that's when we get so carried away. The thought arises: I like this. What can I do? How can I have more? What does it mean about me? All the different memories. And then there's a whole sense of me that gets created just like that.

Or the thought could be: I'm here to meditate and thoughts are bad. That's a thought, based on an idea. So when a thought comes, the other thought—that thoughts are bad—comes up, and that brings aversion. Then we have this resistance to thought, and thought becomes a real problem. But it's not thought that's the problem. It's the not recognizing: thinking is thinking, seeing is seeing, hearing is hearing.

Without recognizing that a thought is just a thought, it takes us so far, so fast. Thought is a useful tool—it's not that thinking is bad. It's not. We want to understand how it works so that it becomes an amazing tool in the world. But when we don't understand how it works, it's running us.

Have you felt that at all since you've been here? Whipped around by your thoughts? And doesn't it feel so real, what they're telling you?

When people describe their experience in the group, they'll talk about a period where it was so difficult. And something difficult is happening—something unpleasant that is difficult to be with. That's not necessarily thinking; that can be happening, for sure. And our training, our habit, isn't to be able to rest at ease with the unpleasant.

So something's going on that's difficult, and that unpleasant feeling gives rise to aversion out of habit. And that aversion usually gives rise to some kind of description, explanation, what's wrong, how can I make it better—an assessment of practice, an assessment of yourself, an assessment of your whole life. Really, all of that in just moments. And there's this strong sense that this is reality, isn't there?

We're assuming this is an unpleasant assessment at this moment because something difficult was happening. But it feels true. It's me.

And then people talk about later—the next hour or the next morning—and it's all completely changed. Because experience—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching—is arising and passing in every mind moment.

There's no stability of objects. That's how our world is. And so, of course, it's changed. By the next morning, it's changed ten million times already. But we're just noticing it in slower motion—how our stories change. The next morning, something completely different arises: something lovely, or just the evaporation of that suffering, that dukkha, and a different story emerges. "Oh, pleasant."

Maybe there's just balance with it, no clinging, and then there wouldn't be much thought about it. Maybe there's a little clinging—normal—and we think, "What did I do? How did I get there?" Or, "This is so great," and whatever story follows. And that also feels equally true and real.

When we're not recognizing the actuality of thought as a thought, it's amazing how we keep getting sucked in. It really is. Just think a very simple thought: "The sky is blue." You've probably thought five others since that. "The sky is blue." It comes up, and where does it go? What is it? It's nothing, right? "The sky is blue." Look at the thought energy of that. It's really ephemeral. It's really nothing. Do you get a sense of that?

All thoughts are like that. A thought is a thought. The content of a thought can be anything—beautiful, neutral. It can be helpful, it can be unhelpful, it can be really awful. That thought energy itself is just a puff. And what makes it more solid isn't the thought itself, but that we're not recognizing it as such, believing the content instead. So then the scary thought arises, and then the whole nine yards, the whole

thing starts. Emotions come with it. They keep the thoughts going.

Some thoughts are heavy. Some thoughts are poof, just like that—neutral. Notice those little neutral ones, because that's a way to keep exploring, reminding ourselves, "Oh, that's thought energy. It's empty." And notice when it's gone. Ajahn Sumedho talks a lot about noticing this. With little thoughts—the big ones you may not notice ending right away—when little ones are gone, there's often a little space before the next one. Honestly, sometimes there is a little space before the next one. Often we don't notice the space.

Where does the thought come from? Where does it go? It's nothing. The thought itself is nothing. Just let in the possibility that if there's a little space—don't grab it, then it's gone—but just noticing that. It's the ground that thoughts come out of. It gets really fascinating.

And this is, of course, something you can't play with when the thought has a lot of juice in it, when we're caught in the content or when it comes together with strong emotion. But there are so many thoughts that are just like—la, la, la, la—stupid, a hundred million times stupid. And you have them so many times. You sit down and you just can't relax until you think of the name of that actor who was in that movie in 2002, and you can't remember the name of the movie either, but it reminds you of something. And you just can't relax until you think of it.

A good use of our time. How many thoughts are just blah, blah, blah, blah, blah? So those ones—not to be aversive—that's really where you can play with recognizing the nature of thought. Honestly, the more we get familiar with it, it is so freeing.

I remember—not exactly when—but the first time that I actually recognized with something that was a little difficult: "Oh, that's thinking. Thinking." It was just like, "Oh, that's thinking. It's not the whole world describing itself. It's just a series of thoughts that are unpleasant. And there's fear, which is an arising experience we can be aware of as well." That's what's happening now. That's always available.

The Tibetan tradition gives this example—I've read it many times—of how a normal person not practicing relates with thoughts versus how a yogi would relate with thoughts. Maybe you've heard this; it's quite well known. It's like the difference between throwing a rock at a dog and throwing the rock at a lion. I don't know who of us would have had the experience of throwing a rock at either one, particularly a lion, but the example gives a good metaphor.

You throw the rock at the dog, and the dog looks and goes chasing all over, following the rock. It just gets into a whole flurry, and it doesn't ever see where the rock came from. It's just following the rock. You throw the rock at the lion, and it just sits there and looks right at the source of the rock—which is you. It doesn't go anywhere, just right at the source.

So they're saying that for an unpracticed person, or in our normal habit, the thought comes and we just go running off in it. Whatever it is, we just take off into that thought and the whole world it creates—pleasant or unpleasant, liking it or not, we're just off in it. But when we're with awareness, learning to just have

awareness that thinking is happening, awareness simply notices the thought as it is. That's all. Whatever the content is, it's thought energy with some content. "Yeah, that's thought." And the nature of thought itself takes us right back into relaxed awareness, into the simplicity of non-identification.

So how many thoughts do we have in a day? A lot. So that's a lot of opportunity. Be happy with the next thought! It's a lot of opportunity to really explore this, to see without judgment. Thoughts are going to happen. The ear hears, the mind thinks. It's normal. And it's useful—we use thoughts.

So when we're feeling it's a problem, widen the awareness first and check. There will be some resistance, some disliking, some idea that this shouldn't be happening, once you've recognized it's thinking. But when you're all caught up in a story, see if you can just go, "Oh, thinking." Not push it away, but turn around and—like the lion—just notice. That energy of thinking. That's what we can play with.

It's not easy, so just a couple of little tips. We often mention these simple ways in our awareness practice: first, just recognizing that we can include thought, thinking, as simply another arising object, same as any other object. Really let that in, especially if lurking in the back of your subconscious is the idea that no thought is better than thought—and maybe that you like no thought better than thought. Just be aware of that. Because if we're not, then as soon as thought comes in, there's this subtle sense that it would be better if this weren't happening. We already know the suffering that comes from that. Then you notice that. But anyway, just having in mind that thought is equally valid—not better, not worse—an object of awareness like anything else.

But of course, it's trickier. Think of how slippery and quick and subtle thoughts are, and also what I mentioned before—the power we give them by believing so implicitly in their content or the energy underneath. So it's slipperier. This is where it becomes a practice, and we can really use skillful means.

We've all said several times: when you're lost in thought and suddenly awareness returns—not an act of personal will, just suddenly, "Oh, I'm thinking"—appreciate that moment of awareness. This appreciation helps us become familiar with how it feels when there's awareness while thinking is happening. Often the thinking will stop, and that's fine. Don't set up expectations like, "I should be able to keep thinking and be aware." There are many different ways this unfolds. Just start to appreciate when awareness comes with thinking. That's one thing.

And there are times when awareness arises and the thinking keeps going. You can be aware and watch what it does. You see how wanting comes up and makes this story, and then you're off in it. Normal. Don't get down on yourself—that's normal.

When we're starting to explore what U Tejaniya suggests, and of course we would all suggest it, you titrate, just as when something is difficult. You get interested in watching thinking, but then you're getting lost a lot. Come back. Pick again a neutral, really easily observable experience to refresh the awareness, to help steady and balance the awareness again. You probably won't have to wait long for more thoughts to come

up.

There are times when the mind is more balanced—you're more calm, the interest is high, there's not a lot of suffering or resistance. That might be a time when you think, "I could really explore thinking a little now," because you're not in such a reactive space. And an hour later, you're doing something else, and you think, "I'll explore thinking," but you just get swept away. That's going to happen. At those times, come back to something easier to be with, to refresh the awareness.

So it's a skill, really a skill that we all can learn if you're not used to it. And it's so freeing. It can change our whole relationship to our experience, to explore thinking in this way and not be afraid of thinking—to be able to use thought rather than being driven by it.

Okay, that's enough. As I said, I could go on and on. So again, really patience with the thinking process. We're remembering none of it is personal—it's just nature. And the thoughts that grip us, there are causes that bring them about. What keeps it going? Widen the attention, and you'll see there's strong emotion underneath, or wanting that's feeding it, or some idea that keeps surfacing. Get curious: What's going on with this? It's a fine object of awareness—a fine object of awareness. And awareness is being strengthened in doing that.

So thanks for your attention. Just let yourself settle. Maybe take a moment to let your attention sink into feeling the body, just being present. It's been a lot of words. Just let awareness rest with a simple experience.

And just noticing how the body feels, how the mind feels, what the mood is. We're not trying to glom on to some experience, but just settling, opening, relaxing any wanting or resistance to just being fully here in this moment. No expectations, no needs. It's just like this now. And awareness just notices whatever arises now.

May the wholesome energies generated by our practice be shared with all beings for their happiness and well-being. May all beings live with wisdom and compassion.

So thank you all. And just let awareness accompany you, seeing what choice the mind makes to stand up, to go to awareness in movement, or something else. It's interesting to see what's making the choice for our own well-being.

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