Morning Instructions: Thought Game

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 47:50

Annie has been pointing us to mindfulness of thoughts all day yesterday, both through the instructions and through the evening Dharma talk. So I thought it would be good to continue with that instruction a little further. In the guided meditation this morning, I'm going to introduce something called the Thought Game. So please settle in normally. We'll give some preliminary instructions to lead up to that and suggest yet another way to work with thoughts as an object for mindfulness.

Again, sitting comfortably, finding the balance in your posture between uprightness and relaxation. Have your back be fairly straight. Your chin should be tucked in a little so that the neck is not tilted upward—it's just vertical. Letting go of any obvious areas of holding. So having the eyes be soft and a little downcast. Letting the jaw be loose. The shoulders be dropped. And let the belly be soft, relaxed.

Then letting the attention rest for a bit in the body, in the sitting posture. Noticing how the awareness can fill the whole body posture. Letting the awareness inhabit the whole body. There's a sense of sitting with attention and dignity in your body.

Opening to sounds, if that helps you bring in a sense of relaxed and receptive attention. Having the sense that you can just rest, and any sound is heard effortlessly, spontaneously.

Connecting again with the body in that same receptive attitude, and now noticing in the body the impact of breathing. Just feeling what happens with one in-breath. Feeling what happens with one out-breath.

A comfortable anchor for many people is the sense of the whole body posture. And then feeling within that overall frame what happens with the breath. This is an anchor that gives both a good sense of groundedness through the whole body, a breadth through the whole body, and also some particular focus on the sensations of breathing.

But as you attend to whatever your anchor is—body, sounds, or breath—also being open to and moving easily to any sense experience that draws your attention: other sensations in the body, emotions or moods, and the arising of thoughts. We easily let go of the anchor, let the attention connect with the new experience as an equally good focus for mindfulness and sustain the attention on the new experience long enough to get a sense of its nature. What kind of sensation? What kind of emotion? What is the thought and its process of arising, persisting and passing?

And so now we can prepare a little bit to enter this kind of mindfulness that we call the thought game. To prepare for it, connect again with your anchor—body or sounds or breath—so that you feel present in this moment. You're bringing a focus of attention, a directed attention to your anchor.

And now let go of the focus of attention on the anchor. Open the attention in a completely unfocused, wide way. And just notice and be mindful of the first thought that arises when I finish this sentence.

When you've noticed one thought, return again to your anchor. Connecting in the present moment, familiar focus, and reviewing your experience with that one thought. Were you able to see its arising, persisting, and passing with mindfulness? And that means basically seeing the thought as just another present moment phenomenon. You will also notice its content. Our intelligence doesn't go away. But you can see its content as a present moment arising also. So this establishes a new meditative relationship to the thought.

Connecting again with your anchor at ease in the present moment. And now letting go of the focus on the anchor, letting the attention just be open as though into a big space. And now become mindful of the first two thoughts that arise when I finish this sentence.

If you've been able to notice two thoughts returning the attention again to your anchor. Staying connected to the present moment.

And now letting go again of the focus on the anchor, just opening to the sense of space and now becoming mindful of every thought that arises until I give a different instruction.

And now returning the attention once again to your anchor. Connecting to the present moment in a way that's real and grounded in a direct sense experience. Just here and now.

And then you might also just review your experience when you were practicing with thought as the object for that extended period of time. How long were you able to be mindful of thoughts coming and going without having the attention lost into the content? How long could you sustain the present moment knowing of thoughts arising, persisting and passing? And again, there's not some standard you're supposed to meet.

It's just noticing what the attention does, how the mind behaves, what's the strength of mindfulness.

Once again, connecting with your anchor grounded in the present moment and letting go of the anchor opening once again, just to notice every thought that arises until I give another instruction.

And coming back again to your anchor.

So this is a way to practice with thought really as a primary focus for mindfulness. Let go of any deliberate directing of the attention. Rest easily and openly in the present moment. Just ready for the next thought that arises. And when it does, notice its arising, lasting, and passing.

There may be times when in doing this exercise, no thoughts are arising. That's fine. See if you can then rest in that open state of readiness. You'll still notice body and sounds and breath and moods. You're just resting easily and waiting for the arising of the next thought. And then seeing that thought with present

moment attention arising, lasting and passing.

So in the remainder of this period, I invite you to play with this thought practice as it seems useful to you. You can start with a period of connection, clear connection to the present moment, and then just open and notice any thought that comes as your primary focus for mindfulness.

If you find the present moment mindfulness is getting lost and you're getting drawn into the content of the thoughts, let go of thoughts for a moment. Come back to your anchor. Re-establish the present moment connection. And when you feel ready to play again, you can open up to thoughts again for a shorter or longer period of time.

If you haven't found this thought exercise helpful, then just continue with the meditation practice you've been doing. Connecting with your anchor, but being open to the arising of any sense experience, sounds, moods, emotions, and thoughts.

What's the relationship to the present moment just now? Has mindfulness been lost in the content of some train of thoughts? Or is there a present moment attention that can see all the sense experiences and thoughts as arising and passing, still centered just in the present moment?

So I hope you're starting to get a sense, at least for moments at a time, of how this mindfulness can become steady and stable in the present moment and what that feels like. We've been spending a lot of time in the last few days really talking about the things that tend to disturb it. Bhante talked a lot about working with physical pain—this is one of the things it's difficult to be with, at least in the beginning. John talked about working with the hindrances and how strong emotions move through and sway us and challenge the steadiness. And Annie talked a lot yesterday about thoughts. Thoughts come and we can lose our mindful attention in their content and then they stir up further emotions.

But as we learn to work with these three big areas which can cause disturbance, we find ourselves more and more able to be in the present with some steadiness and balance. And this has so many benefits in meditation.

First of all, it feels good. And feeling good is a good thing in meditation. It brings that sense of ease and happiness.

Second is from this place, in daily life especially, we make a lot better decisions in our speech and actions when we come from a place of steadiness. We're more thoughtful.

And the third thing is—and the reason it's so important here—is that this is the foundation for deeper insight to take place. And from deeper insight comes greater freedom, greater possibility of liberation.

So what is the key factor in the development of this steadiness of attention in the present moment? Really, it's continuity. I think we've said this a few times. Continuity of mindfulness, which I think I mentioned in my first talk, is really about the frequency of moments of mindfulness through the day. We don't expect

any of you to be continuous from the moment you wake up to the moment you go to bed with your mindfulness. We know there will be interruptions. But the more frequent moments we can put in, in every period of practice—the sitting, the walking, the meals, going about your room, your work meditation, all of that—will help with this development, the buildup of continuity. And at some point you'll feel the momentum start to happen where it's much easier to stay in the present without specially strong effort.

So one of the keys to this continuity is really your commitment to the walking meditation. The schedule is put up the way it is, sitting and walking and sitting and walking, really to support this continuity. So I really encourage you, first of all, to do the walking with as much commitment as you're bringing to the sitting or any other practices through the day.

If you've been a little less careful with the walking than with your sitting, I'd really encourage you to try a period today of continuity where you attend as well as you can fully through a sitting and then make the resolve. Get up from the sitting, stand up, begin your walking meditation, go to your spot, do your thirty or forty-five minutes of walking fully, come back and sit again for the next sitting and see what that kind of continuity feels like if you haven't been doing it already. It really does make a difference and it's what will lead to this greater stability that eventually supports greater freedom and liberation.

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