Morning Instructions - Thoughts

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 1:00:39

This morning we're going to expand the field of the meditation instructions to take in the whole area of thoughts. We've delayed this focus for a few days because thoughts are so tricky. They're very slippery. As you've probably seen, it's a slippery slope into getting fascinated with their content and losing touch with the present moment.

It can come to seem that in meditation, thoughts are really the enemy—the thief of our mindfulness. We might think, "I can't be mindful if I'm thinking, and good meditation must happen when there aren't any thoughts." But that's really a misunderstanding. Thoughts aren't the enemy. It's not noticing them that is the problem.

What we want to do is bring the same mindful attention to the arising of thoughts as we do to the in-breath, the arising of a sound, a body sensation, an emotion, a hindrance, and so on. This is our challenge: Can we bring mindfulness into the realm of thinking?

What this means is we have to shift our relationship to thoughts from the ordinary one. When I came into meditation, I was pretty locked into the content of all my thoughts. That's where I lived—I really lived in my thoughts and they pretty much occupied every waking moment of every day. I was lost in the content, not really aware that that's what was happening.

We're going to shift our relationship into a mindful one that can see thought as another thing that arises, persists, and passes away in the present moment. This is the challenge, and the reason it's challenging is because thoughts are very seductive. If you look closely at the content of thoughts, they tend to be things that arouse our emotions, so it's very easy to get pulled into that content. That's what's seductive about it. The pleasure and pain, the hope and fear, the praise and blame—these all get played out through our thoughts.

Yet if you look at a thought closely, what is it? Most of the time I'll use "thoughts" to mean a string of words that appear in the mind. Some people think in images, and images might also be a form of thinking—whichever way it expresses for you. But let's take this string of words that appears in the mind, basically a form of speech, speaking to ourselves but not vocalizing it. If you look closely at it, all it is is a little whisper of words.

And in fact, as soon as you notice the thought, what usually happens to it? Poof—it's gone. Yet when they're not recognized, thoughts have this incredible power. I'd say every major decision we make in life comes out of our thinking. I remember when I was in college, I was really fascinated with Zen Buddhism.

This thought came: "I'd really like to see Asia." Then in a blink of an eye, I found myself in Malaysia teaching for two years with the Peace Corps. One thought, two years in Asia—direct connection.

You could even say our lives are ruled by thought. The world is ruled by thought. But when we look at what a thought is, it's just this slender whisper—poof. Yet it's the power that we give them that truly rules the world.

Our training in meditation will be to see a thought in the present moment, to watch it arise, persist as it expresses itself, and then pass away. That will be the theme of the morning's instructions.

When we get more familiar with this—it's not easy at first, but when we become more familiar with it—the whole center of gravity of our being shifts. Instead of living in the world of thought and occasionally touching the present moment, we start to live in this big open space of awareness that's like the sky, which is where mindfulness is born. Then thoughts are an occasional puff of smoke in that open spaciousness of awareness. We can take our home in the space and not in the concepts.

In the meditation and guiding this morning, we're going to look at three aspects of working with thoughts. One is simply beginning to notice them, with a suggestion to note them as "thinking." The second is taking thought as the primary focus. This is quite fun—we'll approach it through something we call the thought game. We'll just do that for short periods of time, but it will be an interesting exploration.

The third thing involves dealing with repetitive thoughts, because we all have our top ten list, don't we? It could be the difficult boss thought, or the partner conflict thought, or the "I'm worried about my kids" thought, or "what's happening with my health on this retreat" thought that we bring up over and over. We want to start identifying the particular ones that come often and maybe find some names for those and learn how to work with them skillfully.

Okay, I think that's enough of a preamble so we can go into our formal meditation at this point.

So again, please sit comfortably. Find in your posture that uprightness that also has a sense of ease and relaxation. Connect first with your anchor—the overall body and sitting, sounds or breath. One of the reasons it's helpful to develop a relationship with this focus is that it becomes like a resting place for us. If nothing else strong is going on, we can always come back to this. It's like a meditation home.

Then from that home, anything else that comes up that's strong enough to draw the attention—whether it's a sensation, a sound, an emotion or mental state or hindrance—we easily let the attention move away from the home base and make that new experience a focus for mindfulness. When the new experience fades, we can return, resting in our home base, our home.

So as you rest in your meditative home, one of the things that will draw your attention from time to time is the arising of a thought. Sometimes we don't notice the arising. Sometimes we don't know we're thinking until we've been in the content for a while, even a few minutes, several minutes, twenty minutes.

And then we return to the present moment and we notice, "Oh, there's been thinking." Then we reconnect with our home base or with the body, sounds.

But now see if you can begin to notice a thought as it arises. Sometimes you'll notice it with the arising, sometimes you'll notice it partway in, sometimes you may just notice it at the end. But whenever you notice it, turn your mindful attention to that appearance. That too has a lifespan. A thought arises, expresses itself, and passes away. Can mindfulness see that? Can your mindfulness be with a single thought without losing the connection to the present moment?

So you will notice the content of the thought. Don't think you have to blank out the content. Mindfulness can take that in, but you'll also see its passing nature. And then you're back in the present.

It can be helpful just to support the mindfulness. When a thought comes and you notice it, to note it—just the simple label "thinking." And that just says, "This is what's going on right now. I know my experience in this present moment is thinking." So in a way, that's like a little stake that mindfulness places in the ground right then. "This is my orientation. I know I'm thinking."

So practice with that, resting in your meditative home and just noticing any activity of thought as thinking. And for you it could be words, it could be an image. Let's try the same note: "thinking."

So in this way, a thought can come and go and we don't have to give up any of our present moment mindfulness. Thoughts are just another appearance. Once a thought has been noticed, you can return to your home base or with whatever experience is dominant in the next moment—sensation or sound, mood or emotion. Maintain the continuity of mindfulness through changing appearances.

The second way we'll work with thoughts in this meditation is to take thought as the primary focus for limited periods of time. This is kind of fun to play with. What that means is you're going to just sit quietly and sit in waiting, as it were, for the next thought to appear. Notice it, and then return just to waiting, resting. A little bit the image sometimes used is a cat outside a mouse hole. Cat's very attentive, but not focused on anything particular yet.

So perhaps develop that attentiveness with your anchor, your meditative home. Return to that. Ground the attention—body, sounds, breath. Rest in the anchor. And then have a sense—there are two ways to do this. Have a sense that there's a space around you or a space around your anchor. Or have a sense that there's like a screen in front of your eyes. Blank screen. And you're just waiting with your anchor until the next thought appears. And you're going to know it.

and come back to your anchor.

So let's try it.

Resting in the anchor and becoming mindful of the first thought that arises after the end of this sentence. And then returning the attention to your anchor again, resting with the anchor, collecting in the present

moment, opening to the space or that visual screen.

And now becoming mindful of the next two thoughts that arise after this sentence, and bringing the attention back to the anchor. And check—was it possible to have more or less continuous mindfulness, even as those two thoughts were appearing and passing? So was it possible to know a thought without being carried out of the present moment?

Returning to the anchor, resting again. Opening to the sense of space or visual screen. And now becoming aware of every thought that comes for a limited period of time. I'll end this in a short while, but being aware of every single thought that comes and goes in this brief period.

And now returning to your anchor, reestablishing the attention there, firmly connected to the present moment. And in this next period of the meditation, you might just play with this thought game. Settling in the anchor and then taking thought as a primary focus for extended periods of time. Anytime you find yourself getting lost in the content or distracted, coming back into the anchor, just resettling in the present moment and opening up again when you feel ready. Taking thought as a primary focus.

If it starts feeling like you've lost the mindfulness, drawn into the content of thoughts, just come back to the anchor. Stay as long as needed to really settle again in the present moment. And if you feel inclined, open up again to thought as the primary focus.

The last of the meditative approaches I wanted to mention this morning has to do with repetitive thought patterns. So you've probably already seen that thoughts often run in certain grooves. If you look at it, thoughts tend to be drawn where there's some emotional charge, either of problems or of pleasure. So sometimes these run around relationships or work, vacation fantasies, friends, children, parents, money, home.

So starting just to recognize what subjects the thoughts tend to circle around and then developing a specific note for some of the main ones. So in addition to just "thinking," you might be specific and call it "planning thoughts," "remembering thoughts," "work thoughts," "relationship thoughts," "redecorating the apartment thoughts," whatever fits that particular train. And then when those thoughts arise, by labeling it with that specific kind of thinking, it gives a little more distance around it. You know, we just start to get familiar—oh, that's one of the grooves the mind likes to run in. And we get a little more tolerant, accepting—okay, that's that tune again.

So you don't have to go looking for your own particular categories. But just practice as usual. But when one arises that you know comes often, developing a specific label: planning, comparing, judging, analyzing, rehearsing, and so on.

So in this part of the meditation, return again to your meditative home—breath, body, sounds. And from there, move easily to whatever naturally draws the attention: a sensation, a sound, a hindrance, energy, mood or emotion, or a thought. And just beginning to recognize the particular patterns of thinking that

your own mind likes to go to. Starting to name some of the different categories that you see again and again. And if nothing particular is drawing the attention, just being content to rest with your anchor.

And one last instruction with repetitive thought patterns. If there's one kind of thought that comes again and again and it's really hard to get disconnected, to let it go, and it takes over your mind and a lot of feelings come with it, then it can be helpful to look at what's the emotion that is fueling the thought. And so in this case, with the repetitive thought pattern that feels quite charged and quite hard to let go of, drop down and feel what emotion is accompanying it.

For instance, with a lot of planning thoughts, there's an underlying emotion that's really driving the thinking. And that emotion many times is more fundamental than the thoughts. The thoughts are just kind of getting spun off from that emotion. So if we want to get a little deeper in relation to that thought pattern, let go of the focus on the thought and drop down to the emotional level. What am I feeling emotionally? And to support that, where am I feeling it in the body?

So to stay connected with the emotion, stay connected with where you feel it in the body. Ground the attention there. Just open to and allow the underlying emotion to be there just the way it is. Don't try to get rid of it. Don't need to judge it. Just open, feel it, and allow it. This is a more sure path to understanding than just staying on the level of the thought.

So please continue today to bring thoughts into the field of your mindfulness. It's such an interesting area. Thoughts are incredibly useful.

The meditation on thought isn't intended to deny the validity or usefulness of thought. I mean, look at the room we're in. Everything here exists because somebody thought about it—from the lights to the windows to the statues to the flowers. Everything is here because of thought, and we're supported by all that past thought activity. We're probably here because our parents had thoughts about each other! So the world is often born from thoughts, and thought is very useful in that way.

And yet it can also become a kind of trap for us. When I came into meditation, I'd been through many years of school, and what school taught me to do was think. I had a lot of faith in thinking. I thought as I came into meditation, if I think more, I'll be able to solve my problems through thinking. Then I got a little more sophisticated and thought, well, I'll be able to think my way into enlightenment. By understanding the Dharma conceptually, I'll get free.

So I had a lot of attachment to thought and pursued thought extensively on the cushion. It took me a while to realize it wasn't working, and to trust in the silence as the ground from which real insight comes. Real insight is an intuitive process that sees the world in a new way. That's a creative process that comes better out of some degree of stillness.

In the beginning, I had a lot of desire for thinking. I thought it was going to solve things. Then in the middle, I had a lot of aversion to thinking because I thought it was destroying my silence. So take a

look—which side of thinking are you on? Are you on the desiring side or the aversive side? What the Buddha tells us is that the middle way is the right approach. Don't be desirous with thoughts. Don't be aversive to thoughts. Let thoughts come when they come and go as they go.

Shinul, a Korean Zen teacher, put it beautifully. He said, "Don't be bothered by the fact that thoughts arise. Only be concerned that you're late in recognizing them." This is the key. If we can see them clearly, they're in the field of mindfulness, and that gives us a lot of protection. We see a thought for what it is.

There were a few questions in the basket, so I have time for at least a couple this morning. I'm going to start with a small picture one and then go to a big picture one. The small picture question: "Have you ever asked yourself, am I being brainwashed? Because sometimes I do, although it's a great feeling."

This is a good question. Are you being brainwashed here? Is this some kind of cult and we're indoctrinating you with views to make you our devotees? The first answer I want to give is: not at all. I think it's the opposite of brainwashing. What's really going on is heart-washing—we're cleaning up our heart from all the unwholesome states that have grown up in it.

But let me address the brainwashing piece first. What this implies is that you're being indoctrinated to believe along a certain line, and there are penalties for not believing—like we might send you to a re-education camp somewhere, perhaps in a cold northern monastery, if you don't follow what's being taught.

I want to put a framework behind the things we talk about in instructions and Dharma talks: check it out for yourself. Don't take anything on our word, but check it out for yourself and see if it's true in your experience. This is really where understanding comes from.

Don't rely on what we say. This principle goes back to the very core of Buddhism. The Buddha traveled throughout northern India for forty-five years, meeting countless people and teaching. One day he wandered into a village of the Kalama clan. He had been speaking about sila, about ethical conduct, when the Kalamas raised a pointed question: "Look, many different teachers come through here. Why should we believe you? Teachers say different things, our elders say different things, our books say different things. Different among us believe different things, and we think through different things. Why should we believe you?"

This question prompted what became a founding principle of his teachings. The Buddha replied: "Don't believe it because I say it. Don't believe it because a teacher says it. Don't believe it because an elder says it. Don't believe it because your tradition says it. Don't believe it because you read it in a book. Don't believe it because you figured it out just with reason. Try it out and see what leads to happiness and what leads to suffering. Those things that lead to happiness—promote those, follow those, develop them. Those things that lead to suffering—don't follow them, don't encourage them, try not to act on them."

This is the founding principle in the Dharma, and this is the principle we all follow. So don't think you

have to believe something because we say it or because the Buddha said it. Check it out for yourself.

Now, there are some things you may not be able to verify for yourself in this course. Does karma work? Is there such a thing as rebirth? In a moment of true enlightenment, is there absolutely no greed, hatred, and delusion? You may not find answers to these questions. So those you can take in as reflections—maybe, maybe not. We don't require that you believe in any of those. You can hold those as open questions.

But what we do suggest is this: when greed, hatred, and delusion are present, there will be some suffering. When they're absent from the heart and mind, there's some degree of happiness. That you can check out. You can discover what things lead to a growth in greed, hatred, and delusion, and what things lead to their reduction. If something leads to their growth, don't follow it. But if it leads to non-greed, non-hatred, non-delusion, follow that—it will be for your happiness.

That's the basic message we want to convey. The tools we offer are really to help you come to your own understanding around these things. You don't have to believe anything. What's really going on is that our hearts are getting purified. There's a classical text called *The Path of Purification*, and purification basically means a reduction in the elements of greed, hatred, and delusion, with a corresponding growth in happiness—reduction in suffering, greater happiness. So not brainwashing, but heartwashing is what we think goes on here.

Now for the other question, which I found really interesting. The second noble truth says that craving is the source of suffering, yet at other times the Buddha pointed to attachment to self as the primary source of suffering. How do we reconcile these two? Have you heard both these teachings? I imagine you have.

The second noble truth, which appears in the Buddha's first dharma talk, definitely states that there is dukkha—the first noble truth, as Carol discussed. The second noble truth identifies the cause of dukkha as craving, tanha, thirst. But then in many other places, the Buddha pointed to this confusion around the sense of self as really fundamental to the way we get drawn into suffering. So how do we reconcile these two?

They are basically the same pointing. Craving is inextricably bound up with self. This is probably most clearly shown in the Chain of Dependent Origination, where there are four links in the middle that are truly experiential and worth studying. I'll likely talk about them in more detail later.

The Chain of Dependent Origination consists of twelve links that break down the arising of suffering in fine detail. The first links, starting with ignorance, are philosophical. The later links, which end in becoming, birth, and death, are also philosophical. But there are these middle links—four of them—that you'll see again and again in your own practice. You can check this out for yourself.

The middle links begin with contact—sense contact. This means the arising of experience at one of the six sense doors: sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and mind (which includes thoughts and emotions). This is happening constantly. We are always having contact at these six sense doors, except when we're asleep.

Deep sleep seems to stop this process. Otherwise, in waking moments, these contacts are occurring continuously. This is the basic fact of our experience.

The next link is feeling tone, or *vedana*. We'll explore this more deeply in a couple of days. Feeling tone means that every one of these momentary contacts is either pleasant, unpleasant, or neither—sometimes called neutral. This feeling tone tends to condition our response.

What's your experience in meditation or in life when something pleasant arises? We want more. The feeling tone of pleasant tends to activate wanting or greed. What's the normal response when something unpleasant comes along? Push away. Don't want it. Make it go as far away as possible. What's the normal response when something neither pleasant nor unpleasant arises—something neutral? We go to sleep. It's not interesting. It doesn't excite us or threaten us, so we're not going to pay attention to it.

But this isn't mindful. Mindfulness is noticing whatever's there.

So feeling tone tends to condition responses of greed, aversion, and delusion when we're not being mindful. This leads to the next link: craving. Feeling tone—pleasant, unpleasant, neutral—conditions a response of craving in the absence of mindfulness.

Craving is basically made up of "I want that," "I don't want that," and "I'm going to ignore all the rest." This is a fuller description of what's happening in a moment of craving or *tanha*. Thirst is wanting things to be different than they are. We want that pleasant thing to stay forever, we want that unpleasant thing to go away forever, and we don't want to see the rest forever. Craving is the conditioned and habitual response to feeling tone.

Then what happens when the impulse of craving arises? We take hold of the thing. We grasp it either to pull it toward us or to push it away. You can see this moment to moment in your experience. If there's something you don't like, you have to take hold of it before you can push it. If there's something you want, you have to take hold of it to bring it closer.

Once we've taken hold of something with clinging, we proliferate an "I" around it. This happens all the time. Start to notice this. Once you've clung to something—and it could be any of these areas of thoughts we've talked about: a thought about our relationship, a thought about our work, a thought about a vacation, a thought about our home—

When it's taken hold of, see if the I-thoughts don't come up abundantly around that topic: "I want it this way. I don't want it that way. I like this. I don't like that. I want to change it in this direction. I don't want it to go in that direction."

So when we cling to something, I-thoughts proliferate from there, and that's the birth of self. Craving, clinging, and selfing are all joined together, as pointed to by these links of dependent origination. This is something you can observe in your moment-to-moment experience.

What's your response to pleasant and unpleasant experiences, whether they arise through memory or present-moment awareness? Watch how the I-thoughts grow from that response.

The Second Noble Truth—that the cause of suffering is craving—points to the same reality as attachment to self. They always go together.

Sometimes, however, this process isn't happening. Begin to notice in your day the times when there's not much I-thinking, the times when there's no holding on, the times when there's no craving. How does that feel? Generally more open, more peaceful, more free.

This is the end of suffering—letting go of craving, letting go of self, letting go of suffering. Take a look and see for yourself.

Have a wonderful day of freedom.

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