Morning Instructions, Day 7 - Mindfulness of Thoughts

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 29:57

In the meditation this morning, we're going to extend the instructions to take in the whole area of thinking. The reason that we wait this long in the retreat to introduce thought, even though it's quite a central activity, is that it's one of the more difficult arisings to actually be mindful of. As you know, it's so easy to get swept up into the content of the thought.

What we want to do in meditation is to develop a new relationship to our thoughts that sees them with mindfulness as a present moment happening. Every thought has this present moment nature of arising, persisting for a little while, and then passing away. Mindfulness can notice that happening without getting sucked into the content of the thought. But this is a challenge because it goes against our years of investment in our thoughts, our belief in our thoughts, our being seduced by our thoughts.

The mindful relationship to thinking offers us a tremendous amount of freedom because we see that a thought is just a little bubble, constructed in the moment, bearing often little relationship to reality. And yet thoughts and our belief in them govern our lives. They govern our choices, our actions, our speech, our life direction. So it's very important to establish a clear and wise relationship to thinking, and that's what the meditation today is designed to lead into.

As you develop this mindful relationship to your thoughts, you won't lose touch with the content of the thinking. Don't worry that you're giving something up. You'll still feel the content and see the content and understand it, but you won't be as compelled by it. Then thoughts can be examined with discriminating wisdom to assess them for their truth or untruth, their usefulness or potential harmful nature.

Please approach the meditation this morning in the nature of an exploration of what is this phenomenon called thinking. It's such a powerful force and yet when we look at it, each thought is nothing more than a little bubble, a blip, insubstantial, fleeting, of much less import than a physical sensation in its bare nature. And yet thought rules the world. Most people are subjects of their thoughts.

It's not that we dismiss the value of thinking. Thoughts are necessary for us to live and function in an orderly manner. But as one spiritual teacher said, thought makes an excellent servant, but a terrible master. We want to transform the relationship where wisdom evaluates thoughts rather than thought dictating things on its own.

So far in the retreat, you've probably experienced thinking as something of an enemy, because it is the

one thing that carries us away from the present moment and causes us to be lost in past and future. It's the being lost in past and future that generates this proliferation of concepts and ideas that beset us. So there is certainly a danger to thought running wild.

But thoughts are not a problem if we can bring mindfulness to them. They're not the enemy. Mindfulness can be developed on a thought just as well as it can be developed on a breath, a sensation, a sound, or an emotion. Mindfulness doesn't care what the object is. So thought can be a fine object for mindfulness. It's just a little bit tricky.

In the meditation instructions this morning, I'll review where we've been in the instructions and then give a little specific way to work with thought and then open it up to a more general way of working with thoughts. When I say thoughts, you can interpret it either as an image that comes, that expresses a situation and an activity, or a string of words. Some people are more image-oriented, some people are more word-oriented. So we can use thought in this case to refer to either one. They both have the potential to pull us in out of the present moment.

Begin the meditation by taking a posture that's upright and easeful. Come to rest the awareness in your body, having the sense that the whole awareness can fill the whole body. By whole awareness, I mean an awareness that's wholly in this present moment. This is the fullness of collectedness.

Let go of any thoughts or images that you may be carrying in from a period of work or walking. Just arrive here, being present and at ease in the body. Open to sounds, if that helps you bring in a receptive, effortless attention. Return the attention to the body where we can feel the impact of breathing and sensations throughout the body.

Feel the body as it breathes in. Feel the body as it breathes out. Don't try to stand separate from the body as a detached observer of breath, but feel the breath within the body with that full awareness that fills the body. Just sit, rest and feel.

If there's one area where the breath is experienced most clearly, you can let the attention rest in that area, around the nose, the chest, or the belly. Or you can stay with the experience of the whole body breathing.

As you're attending to the breath, you may notice from time to time other physical sensations that are strong and draw the attention. If that happens, let the attention move easily, naturally to the new sensation, just being aware of it in its bare physical nature: pulsing, pressure, warmth, tingling, vibration, coolness, ache, bliss.

Or you may notice an emotion or a state of mind that calls the attention. Could be one of the five hindrances of sense desire, aversion, sleepiness, restlessness, doubt, or their variations of fear or shame.

loneliness, self-judgment, resentment, despair. They could be one of the beautiful qualities of heart: happiness, compassion, love, peace, interest, joy, calm.

If the emotion is strong enough, you'll feel it somewhere in the body. So let your attention connect with that experience in the body and let that ground the awareness. It's easier to stay connected with the body than with just a vague mood. Feeling the body sensations, you'll also feel the emotion. You can go back and forth between noticing the sensation in the body and the emotion that you're feeling there.

Now we're going to open up to become mindful of the whole area of thought. We're going to play a little game for the first few minutes with thoughts. Imagine the visual field as a kind of blank screen, like you're sitting in a movie theater and there's a blank screen. From time to time a thought will cross that screen, will appear on it.

So we're going to drop the focus on other parts of our experience. Just kind of notice that blank screen that's in front of us. I want to ask you to pay close attention to the first thought that appears in that field on that screen after I finish this sentence. When you've noticed a thought, you can just come back and feel the breath or body. Just rest again, bring your mindfulness into the present.

In giving attention to thought in this way, see if you can discover that mindful relationship to a thought that sees it as a phenomenon in the present moment. It doesn't have to take us out of the present moment into past and future. Instead we can stay grounded, present and mindful as the thought arises, expresses itself and passes away.

Once again, bringing our focus to that blank screen and just alert to the first thought that comes after this sentence. Then return the attention to be grounded again in your anchor—breath or body or sounds. Make sure your connection to the present is clear and firm.

Now we'll open up to this thought game for a little longer. We'll just create a little space of time. In that space, try to notice each and every thought that comes onto the screen.

Then come back again to rest with your anchor, just collected in the present moment. Notice what happened during that period where you were intending to be mindful of thoughts. Could you stay present and mindful for that entire period, noticing each thought that came? Or did you find that some of the thoughts had that sticky, seductive quality that caused you to lose your mindfulness in their content?

We're starting to understand that there are two different ways of relating to thought: being lost in the content and losing mindfulness, or sustaining the present moment attention so that we can see the thought as it rises, lasts and vanishes.

This time we'll take a little longer period with that blank screen. Explore. Take enough time to explore. Perhaps you'll get lost. But then you can return and again take up the thought game—just seeing each thought with mindfulness.

Connect with the blank screen. For a period of time, let thought be your primary focus for mindfulness. Notice each and every arising and passing.

Then come back into the present moment, reconnecting with your anchor and steadying the attention in the here and now.

Now see if it's possible to integrate this mindfulness of thinking into our general meditation practice. You may like to start by connecting with your anchor and then opening to the overall field of experience, noticing any other sensations or emotions that come. See if you can include thought as just another phenomenon in your overall field of experience. Notice them when they arise. You might even use the soft label "thinking." Then in the next moment notice where the attention is landing: breath, sounds, body, mood.

See if it's possible to integrate this mindful relationship to thinking in the context of your overall meditation. If you find yourself ever getting lost in trying to pay attention to thought or confused about what to attend to, just drop everything else and come back to your anchor. That's why it's so helpful to have this home in meditation that's always there for us, always available. We have a simple and developed, cultivated relationship. Anytime you like, feel free to try the thought game again.

It's a way of exploring thought as your primary meditation focus. Just imagine that screen sitting in front of you like a cat outside a mouse hole—no other purpose than waiting for the mouse to appear. And then noticing when a thought comes, expresses itself, and goes.

Not resisting the arising of any thought and not promoting the continuation of any stream of thought. Just letting thoughts come when they come and go when they go, living their own life like any other phenomenon in the vast field of awareness.

This practice invites us into a spacious relationship with our mental activity—neither pushing thoughts away nor getting caught up in their content, but simply witnessing their natural arising and passing. In this way, we begin to see thoughts not as problems to be solved or stories to be believed, but as temporary visitors in the open sky of consciousness.

Through this gentle observation, we cultivate the profound understanding that we are not our thoughts. We are the aware presence that witnesses them. This recognition can be deeply liberating, freeing us from the tyranny of believing every mental formation that appears and allowing us to rest in the peaceful awareness that is always already here.

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