Morning Instructions: Day 9 - Mindfulness of Thinking

Guy Armstrong · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Guy Armstrong · 17:55

This morning in the instructions we're going to take one of the more advanced topics for mindfulness, which is the whole realm of thinking.

So far in the instructions you could almost imagine that thought is our adversary because thought has been the activity that tends to take us away from the present moment and take our attention away from breath or sounds or body or emotions. But this has been a temporary settling in direction.

In the long run you don't want to see thoughts as an adversary because you'll always feel like you're doing something wrong. It's not that thoughts shouldn't be arising. So I hope this exercise this morning will help us all get rid of the idea that it's a mistake if you think—that would be really self-defeating. It's not a mistake if you think.

The Korean master Chanul put it like this: "Don't be concerned that thoughts are arising. Only be concerned if you're slow in recognizing them." So this is the point. We want to bring mindfulness to this area of our experience as with all the other areas.

But as you know, thoughts are a slippery slope. Because when we start to pay attention to a thought, it's very easy to get seduced into the content. Thoughts have this extraordinarily seductive quality of leading us into the alternate realm that they construct. And our practice is to keep coming back to the simple reality of the six senses in this moment. This is the whole key to vipassana.

Connecting with the simplicity of our sense experience is what leads us out of the fabrications that thought creates, which include the whole sense of self. So moving away from an immersion in the thought world is the direct route to becoming free of the sense of self.

So it's also an investigation. As we meditate with the arising of thought, it's an opportunity to find out what is this thing that we call a thought. It's extraordinary when you think about it. Everything in this room has been created by thought, including us. Somehow our parents had some kind of thought connection with each other and we came out of that. The clothes that we wear, the wood that's in the floor, the shawls, the cushions, the chairs—were all fabricated by thinking. The world is ruled by thought. Things that go on in the world all start with a thought. Your job, your house, who you're with—all come out of thought.

And yet, when you look at a thought, what in the world is it? It's just this little tissue of words. And often

when you have enough mindfulness and you turn and look at a thought, it will just go poof and fall away right on the spot. It doesn't always do that, but sometimes it will do that.

So as we start to really bring a meditative attention to the activity of thinking, we start to see the lightness, the ethereal, transparent nature of any given thought. And yet if we take a hold of a thought and invest in it, then it can structure our whole world. So we want to find another place to come from in living our life.

Most of the world lives in the realm of thought, guided by the realm of thought, doesn't see beyond the realm of thought. Thought constructs our view of the world and of ourselves. As meditators, we can come from a different place. And the place that we're moving to is this silent, non-conceptual awareness. Once we land firmly in that place, we can see thoughts as a present moment arising and not be dragged out of the silent non-conceptual awareness. So mindfulness can encompass thinking without being seduced by it. And this is the kind of steadiness of attention that we want to find.

One of the difficulties with thought is that we tend to take it so personally. "This is my thought. What does it say about me?" But again, when you start to look at the way thoughts come, some of them are so random. Who knows what made that thought appear? So Joseph Goldstein has a nice instruction: imagine that your thoughts are coming from the person sitting behind you. And then you don't have to take any ownership. So play with that.

Some people tend to think in pictures more than in words. I tend to think more in words, so I'll probably use language that refers more to words. But you can think of handling images, relating to images in the same way if you're more of a visual person.

And then there's one kind of thought that I want to single out, and that is repetitive thought patterns that go again and again. And these tend to be about things that you care about a lot. So it could be repetitive thoughts about your work or an argument you had with somebody or a personal relationship or how your finances are, what's going to happen with your new job prospect and things like that.

These are things that we tend to run over and over and over. This kind of thinking will often show up in the middle of a silent meditation retreat quite strongly.

So with repetitive thoughts, what's helpful—you might notice that there's like a top ten list on your jukebox. Develop a label for each of those. You might say "relationship thought," "planning thought," "work thought," "argument thought," "rehearsing thought for an interview." Once you start to see a repetitive pattern, give it a label, and that will help mindfulness make a clearer relationship with it.

Secondly, those repetitive thoughts don't tend to resolve themselves through more thinking. It's just not going to happen. So we want to move with these repetitive thoughts out of the enmeshment with the thought process and into the senses again. A very skillful thing to do is ask: what's the emotion that's driving the thought? If a thought's coming again and again with a lot of energy, there's some emotion that's fueling it. That's the motive force. What's the emotion with it? And then drop out of the thought

realm and just feel the emotion. If you can find it in the body, that's very helpful.

Now I'm going to do a little guided meditation to lead us into the mindfulness of thinking, and then we'll leave you to work with thoughts through the remainder of the period.

Please sit comfortably, relaxed in your body, alert. Let's begin this period by just connecting with the anchor—whatever you've been using for that: breath or body or sounds. Just to bring a little bit of stability into the attention at first. You can start to notice if thoughts are present or not, but have the sense that you can keep your attention with the anchor even as thoughts are drifting through. So not yet turning the attention directly to the thought, but just making space for thoughts to be present as you attend to the anchor.

Opening up the attention a little wider, just resting in a receptive way, noticing whatever is arising in the moment—in body, in hearing, in breathing, in mood or emotion. Now we'll play a little bit with thought as an object for mindfulness.

In this kind of open space of attention, imagine that there's just a blank screen in front of you visually. You're in touch with the moment. Now you want to notice the arising, lasting, and passing away of the first thought that comes into this blank space after I finish this sentence.

Having noticed that thought, then return the attention to be with this open awareness or your anchor, staying closely in touch with the present. Steadying the attention again in the present moment. Once again, imagining a blank screen and being mindful of the arising, persisting, and passing of the next thought. Then returning the attention to your anchor or a simple awareness of the present moment.

Notice if in relating to thought in this way, you can still stay with that present moment mindfulness while you're aware of thinking. This is the key. A thought is just a present moment arising. Can your mindfulness stay with it and see its nature of arising, lasting for a while, and passing?

Once again, imagining the blank screen and being aware of the thoughts that arise and pass for a few moments. Make thought the primary object for mindfulness for this short period. I'll say when it will end. Mindful of each thought as it arises and passes.

Now returning to simple awareness of the present moment, reconnecting with your breath, body, sounds, emotion.

Notice in that last exercise if the mindfulness had the power to keep the present moment connection, or if in giving attention to the thoughts it slid away into the content and lost the present moment awareness. This is what we're trying to arrive at—this meditative relationship to thinking that sees it but isn't seduced totally into the content. The more we can find this, the more we can abide in the present even when thoughts are happening. Then thought is not an adversary and does not steal our mindfulness—it's just another object.

We start to see that even the sense of time is just being created by thoughts of the past, which are just present moment arisings, and thoughts of the future, which are just present moment arisings. There is no past and there is no future—just thoughts arising and passing here and now.

If you like, play with this attention to thoughts by making thoughts the primary object for short periods of time in this meditation. You might see how long the mindfulness can hold to this present moment awareness while being aware of thoughts. And then when you feel the seductive power of thoughts taking over, come back to a simple object—anchor, body, sounds, breath.

Reconnect with the present and then when you feel ready, open again.

Just this observation of thought is itself a present moment experience—an interested attention that really wants to understand: what is this thing called a thought? It rules the world, but what is it actually?

Through this practice of watching thoughts arise and pass, we begin to see their ephemeral nature. They come into being, exist for a moment, and then dissolve back into awareness. We start to recognize that thoughts have no more substantial reality than clouds passing through the sky. They appear vivid and compelling, but they are simply temporary formations in the vast space of consciousness.

This understanding is profoundly liberating. When we see thoughts as just another phenomenon arising in awareness—no different from sounds, sensations, or any other object of consciousness—we are no longer enslaved by them. We can observe them with the same interested curiosity we might bring to watching leaves fall from a tree or waves rolling onto shore.

The mind that was once caught in endless loops of planning, worrying, remembering, and fantasizing begins to rest in a more natural state of open awareness. We discover that beneath the constant chatter of thinking lies a profound peace—not the peace that comes from getting what we want or solving all our problems, but the peace of simply being present with what is.

This is the gift of mindfulness practice: to see clearly, to understand deeply, and to rest in the natural awareness that is always here, always now, always free.

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