Releasing The Thinking Mind

Patricia Genoud-Feldman · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2007) · 1:00:13

The path that we're on, the whole of the Buddhist teaching, is an invitation to be present and to see clearly for one sole purpose. I'll use a quote tonight to describe the purpose of the practice. This is from the Diamond Sutra: "Develop a mind that clings to nothing." Develop a mind that doesn't cling at all. And out of that non-clinging, non-grasping, the whole of the Dhamma, the whole of the truth, will just unfold.

This is really the reason for our gathering here—to truly understand the non-grasping mind and how it unfolds. To do that, we need to understand the workings of the mind, of the body, of the heart.

One of the areas that is particularly challenging, at least for myself, and I think from hearing some of you as well, is to work with and understand, to be aware of, the area of thoughts. Tonight I'd like to express a few ideas about the mindfulness of thinking.

I think that with this way of practice, which is more open—where we don't immediately cut a thought away and return to our anchor, the breath for many of us—we might have a little bit of uncertainty about how to be with and relate to this aspect of practice, even though as meditators we may notice that we spend a lot of time in that area. We spend so much time experiencing thinking. Therefore, it's quite important to establish a wholesome relationship with thoughts, one that will be healthy rather than one where we're taken away.

I know that for myself, thinking has often been a huge source of suffering in my early practice—really getting overwhelmed by all these thoughts that were emerging. They were like waves carrying me away, and I really didn't know how to deal with them until I began to experience for myself how to relate in a wise way.

When we begin practice, sitting here, we discover true insights about thoughts. One insight, which Joseph spoke of recently, is to really notice how much time we actually spend in thinking. If we were living our ordinary life without hearing the Buddha's teachings, we wouldn't even know that this can be a source of suffering.

A second insight is that when we're not present, thinking often means we're lost in the past, lost in the future, or even evaluating the present. You can be here, truly trying to relate to the present moment, and yet there's this commentary, this constant evaluation about what the experience is. This is not really being present to the thoughts themselves.

The third insight, at least for myself, is that the content of our thoughts is truly often, if not always, all about me, me, and me. I love Bhante Gunaratana. He says the best song that we have is "me, me, me, me, I,

I, I, my, mine, mine, mine." And it's so true that this is happening in the area of thoughts—a lot of self-referencing. Even when we think about somebody else, it really is happening in relationship to me. How revealing and interesting this is.

This is from Wei Wu Wei: "Why are you so unhappy? Because 99.9% of everything you do and think is for yourself, and there isn't one."

That's exactly it. If you really sense this in your own experience, notice that we are in that relationship. No wonder there's pain.

Thinking is just a natural function of the mind. It really is the function—we can say brain, I'll say mind here. Just like the eyes see, the ears hear, the tongue tastes, the nose smells, and the body feels. It's function. When we understand that, there's already an ease. In the Buddhist teaching, it's the sixth sense door, and it's just a sense door.

It takes us quite a long time, I think, in practice to integrate the understanding that meditation is not thinking about being a better person or improving ourselves or analyzing and understanding. Even though this happens, it's not the aim, it's not the purpose of meditation. We slowly come to understand and establish a new kind of relationship that has to do with what we call direct experience, the actuality of the experience. And that really gives great ease with thoughts.

What does that mean? It means that we relate to thought from the place of attention, really from that place of awareness. What does it mean to relate to thoughts from that place of awareness? It means that we're not getting caught in the thoughts, and we're not pushing them away either.

How are we aware without getting caught and without pushing away? What it also means is that we're not getting involved in the story, in the content of thoughts. And yet we're very present. Thinking is here. We don't need to push away thoughts. So how is that possible? It's not our usual ordinary way of being.

What happens here is that we're interested in a bigger picture, meaning that we are seeing the process within which thoughts are happening. In our ordinary way, we are so interested in the content, what the thoughts have to say. So often we have a wrong understanding and think that we shouldn't have thoughts, that thoughts are a burden to our practice, that they hinder the quality of presence. And it's not true. It's really giving them too much credit in a way, giving them too much power to think that they can hinder the awareness. And yet we don't follow them either, meaning that we don't feed the story.

I think that we do this in meditation, in retreat. In our ordinary lives, there's no way that we'll have the space, at least at the beginning, to really relate because we don't pay attention. We're not paying attention enough so that the naturalness of awareness is the place from which experience is happening. We spend most of our life thinking—I'm sure you agree with that—and we don't even realize that thoughts govern most of our actions. It's so powerful. I was so enthused when I was given this teaching of noticing intention that leads to action, noticing how wise one can be if we see the thoughts that we might not

always put into action. Not all thoughts are wise. You can agree with me. And therefore, there's a possibility of restraint, of seeing that intention: Oh, what's that next thought going to be like? Where is it bringing me?

What happens is that we really get caught in different types of stories that we tell ourselves. We get caught in stories about who we are, how we aren't good enough. There's a lot of "me" in here. For a long time I carried this sense of unworthiness, that I wasn't good enough. And how painful that was, just because of the belief in certain types of experience. I felt that I needed to make up for that goodness, and that if I was who I was, I would never be happy.

One belief: when I was small, a teenager, I really understood that I was not going to get very tall, that I am not a very tall person. And in my teenage years, it was a real cause of suffering. I got over it. But it's so true—being the smallest one in the classroom, at the gym. There were so many things conditioning that belief and that story that was hurting me. Stories that reinforce our sense of dis-ease or disenchantment. How much is the judgment "I'm not good enough"? That judging mind can take so many forms, and we each have our own self-judgment. It really is painful coming from a thought. The judging mind is nothing else than a thought.

Or we get caught in stories about why it's someone else's fault that our lives are so miserable, that we live in this particular way because of someone else. I was seven years old, and I remember getting punished by my mom because I didn't show her my notebook where my grades were—because they weren't good. So I was hiding them. And of course she found them because she hadn't signed the notebook. I got punished and could not go to summer camp that year. What an imprint it left on my mind—that feeling of being so different, separate from my friends, really being not worthy. It stays with us. It creates a certain conditioning. Some events in our past really are the causes for stories we still may tell ourselves today, even if they happened forty or forty-five years ago. It doesn't matter how long ago. There's something that is still lingering.

One of my teachers, to whom I would really relate these emotions—you can sense that thoughts are linked to emotions and that they're not separate from our whole being—had very good advice.

Ask me to question my thoughts, to question the stories. Is this story that is manifesting real? Is it really true? Meaning, does it correspond to the reality of today, of now? And of course it doesn't. And it wakes us up to that reality of really seeing what is the truth today, rather than staying in the whirlwind of believing the story.

Now what is happening, and what is so true in our experience here, is that we are moving away from the words themselves. We're moving away from the concepts. Words are just concepts. And those concepts are simply tools—they're really helpful for our daily life. But in the process of awakening to our reality, it's really important to see that they're just pointers to describe a part of our experience. They're not the thing themselves.

And so then we begin to understand that the concepts really don't describe the truth, the deeper reality. Therefore, we pay closer attention and we live our lives more fully in the moment rather than lingering constantly in the past. This enables us to really get over it. I really sensed, oh, this is a possibility of getting over the emotional state that happened at age seven. Not helpful to keep it going.

In a very simple example, we can really notice how we know the past, and how we bring the past into the present moment. It doesn't have to be this huge emotional story. We already probably know what an orange or an apple tastes like. So when we have an apple, we don't really notice the shape, the color, the texture, what it looks like. We eat it and we're thinking of something else while it's happening. There's a disconnection there from our actual experience. And then we understand how it is that we miss that moment if we're not paying attention with mindfulness. Because if we're not present when we're completely in that action of eating that fruit, then something doesn't feel quite right. We feel disconnected. That is quite simple to understand, isn't it?

I remember when I was presented with exotic fruits, the first time that I went to Asia. There was this fruit that I had not known at all. And there was so much interest suddenly because I had not seen it ever before. I had not known the taste, didn't know what it looked like, if it had little grains inside, what the texture was. And suddenly this rising of interest came up. And I thought, look at how you're interested. And why is it that when you see an orange or an apple, you're really not present for that experience? Just because since forever we know what an apple tastes like. That's the concept. In the actuality of the experience, it's the first time that we'll eat that orange or that apple.

So there's the conceptual layer of our lives, and then there's the reality that can really be found on retreat. And that's what we're inclining towards, just moment after moment.

The concept of pain is very present, and I'm sure in all of you. Isn't it true that when we're sitting all these periods of time, long sitting, unpleasant sensations will come up? They're bound to come up. It's part of the body experience—perhaps the legs. And then we tell ourselves, "Oh, my legs hurt. There's pain here." It seems like it's a very solid thing. This pain is something that will last forever. For the three months I'm going to have this pain. We may become frightened about it. We can have all these kinds of thoughts: that it's going to permanently damage my body, that we're not going to be able to even go into the next walking because it really is very painful. Maybe we're going to need surgery. We're going to have all these thoughts that really frighten us. It's amazing how the thinking pattern goes on.

If we don't see it, we get caught. That's the story about pain.

Now what happens if we let go of that concept "pain" and look more closely at the experience, at the sensations themselves? Something very different happens in the actuality of the experience. It's not so solid anymore. It's this constant vibration and change, tightness and sharpness. And really, we are meeting the actuality of the experience, the reality.

What happens to the concept "pain"? What happened to the story? In that motion, in that experience of really meeting what's there, the story is just put to the side. We're not interested in it. It may be that it still lingers, but we're noticing it. We're not only at a distance looking—we're meeting the actuality of experience, which in this case I'm taking as bodily sensation.

So we have this paradox. You know, thinking is a really essential tool. It's very helpful. It's extremely important that we are able to think, and we've been educated to think. So much of our learning happens around thinking well. That's what you do with children as soon as they can hear words—you teach them concepts. And yet thinking is such an impediment to experiencing our lives fully.

So the practice is to recognize that experience of getting caught in thought and learn how to relate to thinking in a different way. That's really one of the first steps.

Sayadaw U Tejaniya says this about the thinking mind: "When the mind is thinking or wandering, just be aware of it. Thinking is a natural activity of the mind. You are doing well if you are aware that the mind is thinking. But if you feel disturbed by thoughts, or if you have a reaction or judgment of them, there's a problem with your attitude. The wandering mind is not the problem. Your attitude that they should not be around is the problem. So understand that you have just become aware of some functions of the mind. These too are just objects for your attention. Thinking is a mental activity. You should not try to watch thinking continuously. Neither should you try to avoid observing thoughts by immediately going to your primary meditation object. When you realize that you are thinking, always pay attention to the thought first, and then remind yourself that a thought is just a thought. Do not think of it as 'my thought.'"

So that is really the first step. Recognizing that we're caught in thinking requires understanding the various forms that thoughts can take. How do thoughts emerge? We can really notice the different experiences. Of course, there are words, but there are also vibrations—like an energetic felt sense that is happening. Thoughts can be judgments. They can be images. They can even be sounds. I don't know if many of you have had songs emerge in the mind, just as a way that they keep us company. But sounds that we play in our heads are just thoughts.

The particular form that thoughts take will depend somewhat on our conditioning. I've seen for myself that it really depends on what we've been exposed to. If I've listened to music before entering retreat, that's what will show up. If we listen to a lot of music, then when the mind becomes quiet, that's what comes up. If we write poetry or we've been writing a lot before coming, then that is simply what will arise. We'll be very creative in our stories. Maybe we'll even write a novel because that's the tendency of the mind. They're all forms of thoughts.

The Buddha really reflected on how it is that we mistake thoughts for reality. And he taught that we need to see it as clinging. Clinging just happens—as a way that we cling not only to the thoughts themselves, but we believe them to be *my* thoughts. There's an addition of "me," of personality. This is *my* story. And I think that Ajahn Sumedho in his recording last night really emphasized this very well. I won't go into

personality because that's exactly what happens when thinking is really emerging and we take it so personally.

But that force of clinging with the thoughts is just so important to see.

As I was reflecting on this talk this afternoon, I had laundry to do. I took the laundry out of the dryer, and it was this big attached bundle of clothes. I thought, "Wow, they're really clinging to one another." It was just so interesting because of the magnetic force. As I was trying to pull the clothes apart, it was like Velcro—they were sticking to one another because of the force of stickiness. And I thought, that's exactly what happens with thoughts, just like our clothes stuck together.

If we really closely look at our minds, we can see that most of our conditioning, that attraction to thoughts, comes from that clinging, that source of really getting caught. We're fascinated by our thoughts. That's what happens. If there's clinging, there's so much fascination because thoughts can lead us into great imagination. Sometimes there's really more interest in the imaginary life than in reality. That's why thoughts have such a strong force.

Now, another way of talking about getting caught by thought is the word *identification*. You've heard that word, which is exactly the same as clinging or grasping—being identified with a thought. It just means that we're caught in it. And what are we caught in? We're caught in the content. We're caught in believing what we are thinking about. "This is who we are. This is what is happening."

And so then we begin to learn how to recognize, how to relate to thoughts in a different way. Of course, what you'll probably think is, "If I believe the thoughts, if there's content and I really get caught in it, then I need to do something." And the solution seems to be to not think. So often in our practice, we try not to think. That solves the problem, doesn't it? It's an idea that we have, a belief. But meditation, as Sayadaw U Tejaniya said, doesn't mean that we're not supposed to be thinking. The wandering mind, the thoughts—these are just normal. It's a function of the mind.

So it's really important to see how we can get frustrated and judging of our own mind when we think that thoughts should not be happening. And what does that create? Give you a guess—just more thoughts. The judging mind about not wanting thoughts to emerge just creates more thoughts.

So what is the way? Instead of trying to stop thinking, the practice is to let go. To let go of what? The clinging. To stop the clinging or identification. And how do we do that? By meeting our thoughts with mindfulness. That's not a very great surprise, is it? And yet, we are not usually meeting our thoughts with mindfulness. We're meeting them with reactivity. And that's exactly what Sayadaw says—there's pushing away or holding on if it's pleasant. There's some involvement there.

So the practice in letting go, in stopping the clinging, is really allowing the thoughts to be met with mindfulness. What we begin to do is practice mindfulness of thinking, just like we practice mindfulness of walking—holding that intention to recognize thoughts just as thoughts. And when we're caught, we're

bringing mindfulness to the reactivity.

This process of recognition takes a while. That's why we're here. It really does take practice. And I think it's probably one of the areas where we need the most patience, because of the emotional components that are often linked to the thought process.

It's not that we just have these bubbles floating in the air. There's a whole mind and body process that works together. So we may get caught in a thought, and when we're mindful of a thought, many more thoughts may develop from it before we recognize that we're caught. And that's okay, because that moment of recognition is already a moment of mindfulness. That's really important.

So it's not that we need to look and say, "Oh no, mindfulness isn't working, I'm still having this thought." No, it's really a process of enabling one to stay focused on recognizing all these thoughts that may emerge. Even if there are more thoughts, the power of mindfulness strengthens. It strengthens the tendency for mindfulness to arise rather than the tendency for thoughts to arise when we're not mindful.

When this strengthening of mindfulness arises, what happens? It's a weakening of the tendency to identify with thought. And so it's trusting awareness. Sayadaw U Tejaniya says again and again, stay on the side of strengthening mindfulness. Don't worry about the thoughts that are present. Just continue to strengthen your mindfulness. As we continue to do this, concentration, coming from more and more moments of mindfulness, strengthens. It will be easier, and we'll recognize the thinking process more quickly.

Now, if this process takes a while, you might see in the relationship to your practice that you're caught in a judgment phase—a judgment about yourself, thinking that you're not practicing well enough because thoughts are still present. It's important to recognize that judgment is just another thought. The judging mind is so often present. It's so sticky. And yet it's nothing else than a thought.

Here I think that mental noting, at least for my own practice, is really helpful. Because then we are truly identifying what is emerging. We plant a seed of noticing really carefully: What is this? Is it commentary? Then I'm commenting. Is it judging? Then there is the label of judging. To really notice for a while, for some time, for the purpose of seeing clearly—this brings in that strengthening of awareness. It strengthens mindfulness.

And remembering that mindfulness is free of judgment. We bring that awareness which is free of judgment, which is like a mirror-like reflection of what is happening. Oh, self-reference, self-judgment—that's what it is. It's just that. Awareness can still be present. So it's bare of commentary or storytelling when mindfulness is present. It will infuse just what is present.

Why is this so important? Because we stop then trying to manipulate, to fabricate, to create, to do something, to think that it's wrong. We're simply able to be with what is necessary. And no more effort is needed than that.

Now, it's hard to believe. There's always the thought, "Oh, but there must be more that I need to do." No. If you do more, then you just emphasize more of the clinging. So we're not trying to make thoughts go away. We're not trying to make them last either. Neither one.

When we do that, thoughts will reveal their impermanent nature. Thoughts come and go. It's extraordinary when there begins to be a space between thoughts. If the conditioning for a thought to arise is strong enough, then of course it's going to rise again. And maybe there's a new thought that will reveal more mindfulness. Maybe a thought will itself reveal the mindfulness. It's quite amazing to see that thought can nurture the value of mindfulness itself.

We can also make the mind very spacious, very open. Opening that focus of mindfulness allows us to give space to the thinking mind. It's amazing.

If you open your eyes now, notice how we narrow the focus. We see forms, shape. You probably see me, Joseph, Annie, the ocean—all the objects. Form and color. But how about just focusing on the space in the room? Just allowing that to be the main focus: space.

We still see forms and color, and yet there's this sense of really noticing how the mind is resting back. Do you notice how, when you're allowing that spaciousness—the space in the room to be known, not focusing so much on people, color, and form—it gives this sense of resting back? We can do this with awareness. It allows for a kind of letting go of clinging, of leaning forward. Resting. Do you sense that a little bit?

In that spaciousness, there's a possibility of openness. It really is like giving a great pasture to the horse instead of keeping them tight in. That's what we need to do with thoughts—really allowing thoughts to be present. And it doesn't prevent awareness. Quite the contrary. There's an awareness of that spaciousness. Thoughts are there, they're not there. They come, they go. They arise, they vanish. The space is still present. Awareness is always here. The mindfulness is not vanishing with the thoughts, is it? You can really see that as you're fully recognizing, in the present moment, awareness itself. At times we can just stay present to awareness and really have that as the main focus.

This is from Master Dōgen: "Coming, going, the water birds don't leave a trace, don't follow a path."

Coming, going, the thoughts don't leave a trace, don't follow a path. And it's so true that thoughts don't follow a path unless there's clinging, where we invite—and there's an invitation then—to a story. But so many times there's a thought, and if you're really mindful, the thought is gone, vanished. There's a moment of space. There's a moment of real clarity and wisdom. And that often is the place for more awareness, for trusting awareness.

Awareness is the refuge. There isn't any moment where awareness will vanish. We can really trust the mystery, moving towards the unknown.

Now, at times, these thoughts create a lot of suffering. And that's when a thought added to another thought

creates a story. When we really believe it, when we're so attached to the story, there's a hurt. There's often an emotional component, and it doesn't feel empty then. It doesn't feel spacious at all. It really feels like obsessive thinking.

You probably have had that—where all day long it's the same old record, the same old CD playing. We've known that story out of habit so many times. And the question may come up: why is it still present? We've dealt with this so many, many times. That happens in practice because there's a way that we are purifying the heart and mind. Obsessive thinking emerges when there's a charge in the body of strong emotion.

And here, Sayadaw U Tejaniya has an advice for us.

He says, "It doesn't matter whether thinking stops or not. It is more important that you understand whether your thoughts are skillful or unskillful, appropriate or inappropriate, necessary or unnecessary. This is why it is essential to learn to watch thinking without getting involved. When a thought keeps growing, no matter how much effort you put into trying to simply observe it, you are probably somehow involved in the thought. When this happens, when thinking becomes so incessant that you can no longer observe it, stop looking at the thoughts and try to watch the underlying feelings or bodily sensations instead."

This is wise action. Why is it? Because if there is a real long story that we're caught in, it really means that there's a resistance. There's something which needs to be seen in the field of the felt sense of resistance—the body, the mind, and the link between body and mind, the emotions in the mind, the emotions in the body. And to really attend to ourselves in a way that we feel comfortable with it. Again, not to push away, but really to be very, very gentle and soft. It's to meet the resistance with an attitude of not at all pushing away.

If there's wanting or there's aversion in relationship to that story, we allow those feelings of reactivity to be met just for what they are. How does aversion feel? Is there pressure, tightness in the chest? Or maybe it's the belly. Really cultivating a sense of presence to the pain that is happening, the emotional knots, and holding a sense of mettā is very helpful because it will just soften. Mettā is pure kindness. And rather than reacting towards, there's this wholesome intention of meeting what is, and it changes the landscape. We're no longer in avoidance, but really relating to resting back and receiving, and noticing then the impact of that relationship.

So it may be useful at times to, like Sayadaw says, move away from the thinking process, from watching the thinking mind, and again come back and use the power of mindfulness in relationship to bodily sensations. Noticing often the energy with which we practice, really noticing if it's an energy of aversion, of pushing away—then definitely this needs to be seen. Because it really just reinforces the pain, rather than allowing the healing, the tendency to not get so anxious about it.

Often in relationship to this, fear shows up. And fear is okay. As Joseph said the other morning to a person,

we can be with fear as long as we're not completely overwhelmed. We're working in the field of really allowing some tenderness here. And of course, wisdom. But meeting fear allows us to really be at the edge of what we have already known, the known that we know so well, and to explore that area which is not yet known to us.

A yogi not long ago, not in this retreat but this summer in Israel, said, "I just hate being here on retreat. All that I see all day long is a pile of garbage." She said, "That pile of garbage just accumulates in my mind. An endless flow of horrible thoughts that come up and make me remember only one thing. And that one thing is all the bad stuff that I've done in my life."

You can imagine that. It's really quite touching to have a person come up and say that. And it requires our deepest tenderness to practice. Maybe it's not to that extent, and yet there are times when we really need to be soft and gentle. In practice this will happen. Unresolved issues do show up just because we're so much with ourselves. And sometimes the vividness of the pain shows us that we are in a process of purification.

We see this process just for what it is. Allowing the thoughts to be seen just for thoughts, emotions just for emotions—this is it, and it's not mine or me—then of course there's more ease. And there's a cleansing that happens. I think it's so important to not be afraid of what can show up, because all of it is a passing show. It's a process due to certain conditions. And we are really healing, purifying this mind and body process. This is all that is happening, until we really sense that reinforcement of liberation, of non-clinging. Aversion will show up. Desire will show up.

And they're just to be seen for what they are.

So there's nothing in the context of the practice that should not show up. You see, that's exactly what she thought. She said, "Oh, but I can't even report this. I feel so bad about myself. It's unwholesome." And in the process of practice, it's really important to allow those yucky and unpleasant mind states to show up because we're in the process of purification. It's not about running away because something is unwholesome. We don't have the intention to deliberately bring these things up, yet if they show up, we hold them with the wholesome intention of understanding that this is a process of purification, and that we don't need to avoid those thoughts and emotions.

Bhante Gunaratana says, "Somewhere in this process, you will come face to face with the sudden, shocking realization that you're completely crazy. Your mind is a shrieking, gibbering madhouse on wheels, barreling pell-mell down the hill, utterly out of control and hopeless." He says, "No problem. You are not crazier than you were yesterday. It has always been this way, but you never noticed. Now at least you know it and you can begin to learn."

And it's true. Some of our parts carry a lot of shame or a lot of blame. It's a humbling process, yet it's a deeply true process—that we come so intimately close to the truth, seeing that it's not at all me, and yet

being completely intimate. That's a funny thing, isn't it? That's how liberation comes about. We get to know our craziness, our stupidity, our shame, our blame, our fears—all of it. All of it can be seen, and we'll see it probably over and over. Thank goodness there are moments of peace, of joy, of tranquility! Otherwise we would really go insane. But there is a part of our practice that truly reinforces the seeing of those parts we don't feel so worthy of. And we understand that it's just the process. If we don't grasp—and that is why wisdom is so foundational—we allow ourselves to understand that it's just a process.

Jamgon Kongtrul, the Tibetan Lama, says, "If you follow or get lost in any thought or emotion and let your mind wander outwardly, your work is in error and you are not different from any ordinary person. Turn your attention right in and look right at your mind. When you look at it, nothing is seen. Relax. Let everything be and rest in that state. No matter how many thoughts or emotions there are, when they aren't grasped, they go freely on their own and become pure awareness."

So on one level, we really see the shadow side. On another level, we can totally relax, because thoughts and emotions don't have any effect on awareness itself. Awareness is totally pure. Thoughts are not at all tainting the quality of awareness. It's just like if you leave a glass of muddy water quite still, without shaking it, without moving it, the dirt will simply settle to the bottom. And so we allow our thoughts to really settle very naturally in a state where there's no interference.

The process itself is one of letting go of clinging. Not fighting against, not wanting to get rid of, not suppressing—just recognizing, relaxing, and allowing awareness, allowing mindfulness to do the job.

We can say, in a way, that the thoughts are the clouds, the moving mind, and awareness is the sky. Thoughts come and go; they're in motion. That clarity of the blue sky is always present. Awareness is not at all affected by the thoughts. Whatever their creation, whatever the fabrication we make around them, it's just a fabrication. They don't have any intrinsic reality. And that is just so extraordinary to understand.

So this is the working of the mind. And as we train ourselves to look at what is present, we actually see again and again that we have a choice—that we can choose to continue to be lost in fantasy, or we can choose to cultivate a wholehearted presence that helps us make wise choices.

What we see here we will bring outwardly into our life. With that purity of intention, simply clarifying the natural state of the mind again and again, we allow ourselves to have a wholesome relationship to ourselves—one where there's more ease, more awareness, more understanding. And with that, we lift the veil of ignorance. Then we act in the world from that space of greater wisdom, of greater understanding.

From that space of knowing, action arises. And that is just so amazing—that it's all happening through the understanding of our own minds. It's encouraging for the world today that there are so many people interested in really looking a little more intimately at what is going on.

These lines from the Buddha: "We are what we think. All that we are arises with our thoughts. With our thoughts we make the world. Speak or act with an impure mind and trouble will follow you. Speak or act

with a pure mind and happiness will follow you."

So we're really in this process of understanding—meaning that we really understand the relationship to the thinking mind and how it purifies itself with awareness. That's a very clear statement from the Buddha. Therefore, we can help ourselves, and we can help the world. And that's amazing. It's an amazing capacity of consciousness. This is the gift of the practice.

May we rejoice in the fact of being able to see clearly and to nurture those qualities that will lead to liberation, to awakening.

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