Morning Instructions - Working with Thoughts

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Three-Month Retreat (IMS 2012) · 45:39

One of the most interesting aspects of meditation practice is working with thoughts—becoming mindful of thoughts, taking thought as an object of meditation.

Thoughts play such a powerful role in our lives. They condition so many of our actions. They condition so many of our emotions. And yet, as you've probably recognized, they often slip into the mind unnoticed. They have all of this power precisely because we don't notice that they're there.

The amazing thing to learn about the nature of thought is that in and of themselves, they don't have any power at all. The only power is the power that we give them. When we really look at a thought, when we can become mindful that a thought is present and are looking at the very nature of thought—thought as a phenomenon—we see that it's really little more than nothing. It's like this tiny little blip of energy in the mind, completely insubstantial, uninvited, coming and going rather quickly when we're not invested in it.

And yet when we're not mindful of the fact that we're thinking, we see over and over again how the thoughts proliferate, how we hop on trains of association, having no idea that we've hopped on the train, having no idea where the train is going. Then sometime later—whether it's thirty seconds or a minute or twenty minutes—we find ourselves off at another station, in a completely different mental environment.

So the first thing to practice is to change the attitude in the mind from having thoughts be a problem to simply taking interest in how they're arising, what their nature is. It's like discovering this whole internal realm that's of such significance in our lives, and yet one which we hardly pay attention to. Every time a thought arises in the mind, instead of having a judgment about it or a judgment about oneself, you might say, "Oh good, here's a chance to explore what a thought is, how it functions, what its nature is." We come to understand so intimately and so directly in our experience how it's working, how it's functioning in the mind.

There are a few different levels on which we can do this.

First, it's extremely instructive to pay attention to the moment of awakening from being lost. A thought arises, and we very likely are not mindful of it in the moment of its arising, but then at some point we become aware: "Oh, I've been thinking." Right in that moment of waking up, highlight the transition. Highlight the difference of experience you've had between being lost and being awake to the fact that a thought was present. It's just in that moment of transition that we can experience the difference very clearly, because we've just gone from being lost to being awake.

The more we can see the difference—being lost was like this, being awake is like this—it reveals to us both

the seductive power of thought and the nature of awareness. The nature of awareness becomes so clear in that moment because we've just been unawake, unaware, and we can see clearly the contrast.

The good news about working with thoughts in this way is realizing that for as many times as we're lost, that many times do we awaken. Nobody stays lost in thought for three months. It's for some relatively short period of time. So for each time of being lost, that many times do we actually wake up. But the tendency of the mind is to judge ourselves for being lost instead of to appreciate and understand the quality of wakefulness. So highlight that moment.

Another useful exercise in the moments of waking up from being lost is to sometimes ask the question, or hold the question in mind: What is a thought? On this level, it's not so concerned with the content, but just with investigating or seeing directly for ourselves what this phenomenon is. In doing that, it's not that we're looking for an answer. Rather, simply by asking the question, we're directing our mindfulness to the thought phenomenon as an object. And in doing that, we begin to see for ourselves its very empty nature, see how very insubstantial it is. So at times—not necessarily each time, but at times—just holding that investigative question: What is a thought? Not looking for the answer, but using the question to focus the attention.

There are other times when we do want to relate to and understand the content of our thoughts. We can begin to recognize perhaps certain repetitive patterns. Many times thoughts are just random—they come and they go without any particular pattern. But as we become more mindful of thought over time, we might begin to recognize very familiar patterns that seduce us again and again, the trains that we hop on repeatedly. It might be planning, a lot of future-oriented thoughts. It might be memories. It might be judging thoughts, either self-judgment or judgment of others.

If you begin to recognize some common patterns of content, then it might be helpful at the beginning of a sit or the beginning of a walk just to recognize: "Oh, this is a pattern that I often get caught up in. Let me keep an eye out for the arising of these thoughts." We set a kind of intention. We set the radar in our mind for the arising of those particular patterns.

Simply by setting the intention, it can help support a quicker awareness of that pattern.

It's so interesting to just watch the mind-created worlds of thought. Those of you who have ever read comic books know all the characters, and then they draw these little bubbles where the dialogue or what the character is saying appears, printed in these little bubbles. Well, we're kind of like these cartoon characters. And these thought worlds are just what's happening in the script, in the little bubble of thought in the mind. It has no other reality than as a thought in the moment.

So all the future thoughts you have are just thoughts happening now. All the past thoughts you have are just thoughts happening now. Beginning to see that over and over again is very freeing.

There is another level, though, where we do pay attention and discern the difference in different contents.

That's what I talked about the other evening, where we begin to discern, particularly with repetitive patterns—not so much with quickly passing thoughts—are the patterns wholesome or unwholesome? Are they rooted in desire, ill will, delusion? Or are they rooted in generosity, kindness, understanding?

So with repetitive patterns, we do want to understand their content, particularly with regard to whether this is wholesome or unwholesome. That gives us a framework for understanding which patterns of thought we should really practice renunciation with. These are not helpful. These are not skillful, either for myself or for others. And to recognize those patterns which are wholesome, as when we're doing the *mettā* meditation—wholesome thoughts, these are to be cultivated.

As a reminder of two questions that you might bring into your practice with regard to repetitive patterns of thought: we can ask ourselves, is this necessary? Is it helpful? Is it skillful? Just that simple question can be enough to release us from being lost, release us from the grip of the content.

So settle back into awareness of the body. If you found it helpful to use that phrase, "there is a body"—and again, that's not a metaphysical statement, it's just the most gentle framework for settling back, aware of our physical presence in the most open, gentle, receptive way. Not looking for anything in particular, simply settling into the framework "there is a body" and then becoming aware of whatever reveals itself. It might be the feeling of the breath, might be different sensations, might be sounds arising.

And begin to pay particular attention now to the arising of thought, both discerning its content and taking interest in its nature.

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