Working with Thoughts

Joseph Goldstein · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Joseph Goldstein · 1:04:34

This morning I'd like to talk about one aspect of our experience that is so predominant and so determinative of much of what happens in our lives—an aspect that, even though it's so predominant, we rarely pay careful attention to. It's something that you're very familiar with, and that is how to relate skillfully to all the thoughts or images that are arising in the mind.

As you've seen, and as almost anybody has seen who just sits down even for five minutes and meditates, we become aware of the proliferation of thought in the mind. Ordinarily, in the course of our daily lives, these thoughts come, we get lost in them, caught up in them, often act on them, and even when we don't act on them, they still have the power to condition strong emotions within us. So it's a very powerful force.

What's so amazing about applying mindfulness to thought as an object is that when we are mindful that we're thinking, the thoughts have no power at all. We see them as just this very passing, insubstantial, empty phenomena arising and passing through—just like a sound arises and passes through. And yet when we're not aware that we're thinking, they have this incredible power in our lives. Our thoughts are saying, go here, go there, do this, do that. And we just follow along like puppies on a leash. Our lives are, to a large extent, the unfolding of our relationship to and our acting out of all the conditioned thoughts that are arising.

So it's really important—an important part of the practice is to hone our skill in becoming aware of thoughts as they appear in the mind quicker, closer to the beginning. As we observe thought, we see that we often become aware of them after they're over. We recognize, oh, I've been thinking, and we're looking back at it. Occasionally we can become aware of the thought in the middle. And when the mind is quite clear, we can be aware of a thought just as it's arising. This takes practice—including thought as an object of meditation—so that we're strengthening our ability to be aware of them as close to the beginning as possible.

As with so many other aspects of the practice, there are different levels of attending to thought, and each level has its own benefit, its own use.

For example, the first thing we might want to do, and you probably have been doing this to some extent, is simply being aware that we're thinking. A thought arises in the mind, and as soon as you become mindful of it—at whatever point, whether after it's over, in the middle, or at the beginning—there's a simple acknowledgement. The acknowledgement is strengthened, the habit of awareness is strengthened, by using the soft mental note, particularly with thinking. I think that's one of the arenas where the mental noting is particularly helpful. Simply to make the note, "thinking, thinking"—we're actually

acknowledging, yes, this is what's happening—and then coming back to whatever the anchor is.

The next level or step, and you could begin doing this today if you haven't already, is to become aware more specifically of the very common thought patterns. What are the top ten tunes that just keep coming back again and again? For each of us they may be different, although I think it would be surprising to realize how much is in common in terms of the patterns of our thoughts.

For example, how many plans have you made since you've been here? Planning—that's a common tendency. And plans are very seductive. They really pull us in to all these future fantasies of what we need to do or want to do. So keep an eye out for planning mind, and make that specific note when you see it. You're reinforcing the mindfulness of that pattern, and because it's a common pattern, it will be very useful, very often.

It might be the pattern of judging—either judging others or judging oneself. That would be really useful to see, so that we don't get identified with those judging thoughts. The judgment itself is not a problem. It's a conditioned habit of mind that almost all of us have. The problem arises when we're not aware that it's there and we're identified with it. We're giving the judgment energy from the inside; we're strengthening it through our identification with that thought.

Instead, when we see it as simply a thought arising and passing, when we're seeing the impermanence and emptiness of thought in that way, the content doesn't really matter. The content is very important when we choose to either identify or act on the thought, because that's where the discernment of which thoughts are skillful and which are unskillful is so important. But from the meditative perspective, where we're just watching the phenomena, the passing flow of phenomena, and we're seeing thought just as another arising phenomenon, the content is not important at all. It's just something coming and going.

The reason for naming and labeling, making a soft mental note of the predominant patterns, is that it will help to keep the mind in that place of openness and non-identification with those patterns that arise most frequently for us, that are most seductive for us.

So really look. See how planning, judging, commenting, remembering—so many of our thoughts are really just about past and future. In fact, it would be interesting for you, not exactly to keep count, but just out of interest in the back of your mind, to see if you can become aware of just how many of our thoughts are past and future.

It will really give a strong indication of the challenge of staying in the present, given this conditioning of our thought patterns.

So the next level of awareness of thought—we begin with just "thinking, thinking" as our first acknowledgment. Then, when we feel somewhat comfortable or easeful with practicing mindfulness of thinking, we give a little more attention to the kind of thought, to the predominant patterns. We can give a more specific label.

There's a third level of attending to thoughts, and it's the one which in some way I find the most interesting. When there are a lot of thoughts happening, when we're in a stream of thought, that would be a particularly good time to ask a question of oneself that almost nobody ever asks. It's a very unusual question for people going through life. And the question is, as we're in this stream of thinking, to ask: What is a thought?

Not what is the thought saying—so we've dropped from the level of content—but what actually is a thought as a phenomenon? To me, this is fascinating because it's such an interesting phenomenon.

When thoughts are happening and we're asking the question, "What is a thought? What is this?" we see quite quickly—this does not take years of practice to see—we see how ephemeral and empty and insubstantial a thought is. We're just sitting, feeling the breath, feeling the body. A thought arises, and if we're attentive to the fact that thinking is present, well, what is that? It's actually little more than nothing. It's just this tiny little energy condensation into words, something like that. There's not much there.

And we can see this. We can see, when we're mindful of it, that just in that moment of awareness the thought often will disappear because we're not feeding it, we're not identified with it, we're not lost in it.

So this to me is what's quite remarkable as a particular phenomenon: when we are unaware that we're thinking, the thoughts dominate our lives. They're such a powerful force. They're directing us. It's like they're little dictators of the mind. And yet when we are aware of them, we see that there is really almost nothing there. It's just this little burst of thought energy that comes and goes and has no impact at all.

This shows, in a very immediate way, the power of mindfulness. Without it, we're just lost in our stories. And with it, we can see thought itself as being so empty and insubstantial and transparent and without much power at all.

So I would suggest, if you're interested in this investigation, instead of seeing a proliferation of thoughts as a problem, you could use that time—since thoughts at a particular moment may be predominant—as a good opportunity to really look. You're having lots of chances to ask the question, "What is this? What is a thought?"

It's not so much that the purpose of the question is to come up with an answer. This is not really a metaphysical question. The question is simply a way of directing the mindfulness and awareness to look directly at the nature of thought itself as a phenomenon, not the content. On this level, it's not about the content. It's just about what the thought is in itself.

So these are a few of the levels, if you're taking interest in this arena. First, just to be aware that you're thinking. Then, acknowledging the content of the predominant pattern—planning, remembering, judging, whatever. And third, asking, "Well, what is a thought?" Just explore out of your own interest in this.

There are a few other elements of working with thought that can really enliven your practice. First, to

become aware of what your habitual response is to becoming aware that you've been thinking. We're sitting with the body, with the breath, with different sensations—we're opening the field. A thought comes, we're not aware of it, we get caught up in the train of association, we're carried along for a while, and then at a certain point we wake up from being lost.

It would be interesting for you to see: what's your first reaction when you wake up from being lost? The first reaction is often just rushing back to whatever the object is, our normal anchor. We wake up from being lost in the thought, and we hurry back to the breath.

So that's a normal response. Or we wake up from being lost in thought and then have—even if it's just a small moment—self-judgment: "Lost again. I'll never get this."

There's a third alternative, which will turn all of that around. It involves understanding that for as many times as you've been lost, exactly that many times do you wake up—because nobody is lost in thought forever. So pay attention to that moment of going from the delusion or ignorance of being lost, where something is happening and we don't know it's happening, to the moment when we emerge from the thinking process. Right in that moment of transition—from being lost to becoming awake—that's a very powerful and instructive moment. We can experience directly, not theoretically, that we have just gone from ignorance to wisdom, from delusion to awareness. We've actually had that experience every time we wake up from being lost in a thought.

So don't just skip over it. Actually highlight it: "Oh, being lost felt like this. Being awake feels like this." We're highlighting the difference in our experience of these two states—being lost in a thought versus being aware that we're thinking. This gives us a very immediate understanding of what awareness is, what ignorance is, what being lost is, what being awake is. And in these moments, this is not conceptual. We're actually having that experience.

So every time you wake up from being lost in some thought chain, it would be helpful if you could recondition your habit—going from self-judgment, "lost again," to appreciation: "Oh, awake again." Highlight the experience: "I've been lost and now the mind is awake, it's aware." And if you're really connected and paying attention to what that wakefulness feels like, as opposed to the delusion of having just been lost and caught, there is a great delight in all these moments of waking up.

You can have a sitting where you almost turn your whole assessment machine around. It's almost appreciating all the many times you've been lost when you're highlighting that each of those times is also a moment to appreciate the wakefulness. "Oh good, awake again." Then the mind brightens. This could give you many moments of delight in a sitting, because we get lost a lot. But instead of emphasizing the lost part, emphasize the awake part.

It really energizes the practice and serves as a reminder of what we're doing here. It takes us beyond the practice as a technique to the practice as a vehicle for direct learning about our experience. We're going

from the methodology of mindfulness to what we learn from being mindful. And this is a powerful learning—this contrast, this real understanding of the difference between ignorance and delusion versus wakefulness and awareness. It's right in those moments of transition, just in that moment when we wake up from being lost, that this becomes very clear.

So this will be a very rich domain for you to explore. We'll go on in subsequent days—there's a very direct connection between thought and emotion. In the next few days we'll be talking about including all the emotions that arise in the practice as objects of mindfulness meditation. Then it gets very rich, exploring the whole emotional terrain: how we relate to the emotions, whether we're identified with them or not, what conditions different emotions. You really begin to understand the dynamic of thought and emotion and how they are mutually interdependent, conditioning each other. There's a lot. It's an incredibly rich practice as we open up to all these different arenas of our experience.

Okay, so you can just take your comfortable posture. Settling into the body—there is a body—creating that larger framework, and always keeping it very simple. There is a body. Feeling yourself sitting, and whatever arises within that frame: there is a body.

You'll often naturally feel the body breathing, because that's always going on. Let the breath be however it is. It's not a breathing exercise; it's an exercise in awareness. Not pulling the next breath in, but letting it find its own time. Mindful of any particular bodily sensations that call your attention. Opening to them, feeling them, seeing how they change.

When you're with the breath, set that intention at the beginning of each breath to stay steady for the entire duration of that single breath. Really playing with that intentionality dial. Staying alert for the arising of thoughts and images in the mind in just the ways I've been talking about.

He often uses the example of light awareness—the fact that it doesn't require much force. He suggests that people simply become aware of seeing. When you turn your attention to seeing, does it take any effort to be seeing, or to be aware that we're seeing when we remember? There's no forcing or tightening or particular effort needed other than to be present.

But that "other than to be present" is a significant clause.

This relates to what I was talking about last night—really examining how we're making effort. Is there a kind of agenda in the mind, or a wanting, or an expectation? Or are we simply being present and aware of what's arising? That's very simple. That's very light in that sense.

But this lightness of attention is not in contradistinction to a continuous steadiness on the object. These are two different things. We can have the light awareness and still have that intentionality to settle into the experience, even of a single breath or a single step, with unbroken attention.

They're different because they're referring to two distinct qualities. One is the steadiness of continuity,

and one is the energy with which we're paying attention. He'll often use that phrase "light awareness" and distinguish it from what I would call an over-intense focusing. It's not, "Okay, I'm going to be attentive to the breath!" It's not that. It's light in that sense—settled back, receptive, letting experience come. He has a certain Taoist approach in terms of lightness, just seeing the emptiness of it all. But being more or less mindful isn't about that. It's about how steady we are in whatever the experience is.

I'll say one more thing related to this. People often have the question: when should I really have a directed awareness on the breath or a movement—when we're choosing an object to be with—and what's the relationship of that to open, choiceless awareness, where we're not choosing but simply open to whatever is arising?

Both of these are important components of the practice, and they interweave with one another. It's not one or the other—it's both.

It's important to develop a foundation of steadiness by attending to a primary object, whatever it may be. It could be the breath, it could be something else. The effort to come back to it, to keep the mind steady—this is the development of one-pointedness, of undistractedness, of steadiness of mind. We could practice this alternation within one sitting or over a period of time.

We establish some level of stability, and then we open up to a more choiceless mode. Whatever's arising, we're just paying attention to that without a primary object at that time. But then, in practicing this more choiceless awareness, almost everybody will feel a certain diminishment of stability after some time. That's the moment to come back to a more directed awareness. Establish that steadiness. Then return to open awareness.

This is very intuitive. There's no formula for it. Just feel into your own practice and see what's appropriate at a particular time, knowing that both are important and they feed each other. They're interwoven.

Depending on the activity we're engaged in, there are different levels of mindfulness that are appropriate. When we're engaged in some conceptual process—often a creative process—we may want to allow the mind to free associate, to open to a wide range of what might come up, because that's of value in that activity. Or if you're trying to read a book, for example, if you're going "seeing, seeing, seeing," you're not going to get very far.

And after a while, you're just seeing black on white.

So we have to acknowledge that there are times when we want to be engaged on the conceptual level, that that's what's appropriate to the activity we're engaged with. But there is a kind of mindfulness—and my first teacher, Munindraji, spoke of this—which could be applicable even at those times, when we're allowing the mind that freedom of wandering or free association.

He called it a kind of general mindfulness that's not specific and not pinpointed. It's just a general

mindfulness in the background which will become aware whenever an unwholesome mind state arises within that activity. So it's not interfering with the activity, but there's enough awareness to know if the mind gets triggered into a reactivity of wanting or greed or judgment—whatever it is that is not wholesome, not skillful—that general mindfulness will pick it up. And at that point we might think, "Oh, what's going on here?" At that point we might step out of that process and really examine in a more careful way. But when that is not happening, then we just let it go for that period of time, for that activity.

Now, someone might ask: is walking in nature something to be avoided, since it seems a form of wandering? No, the walking in nature is not the problem. That can actually be very beautiful, and the Buddha spoke a lot in praise of being in the forest and the peace of it and being in nature. So that can be a beautiful aspect of our practice. But applying the practice at that time is exactly the same as what we do in the whole sitting.

As you're walking through nature, you want to be aware of your moment-to-moment experience. And just as I was talking about a few moments ago, there could be this interweaving. For some time you could really be in the body, feeling each step, just like you were doing walking meditation, but maybe at a little faster speed. You're walking, attending to the feeling of the body moving. The mind wanders, you get caught up in some thought, become aware of it, and then come back to the movement.

You could start, for example, with that kind of attentiveness, and then at a certain point, if you feel the mind somewhat steady and present, you could be walking through the woods with a more open awareness, where moment after moment you're simply receiving what arises. There's a question to hold in the mind that can help bring awareness into that place of openness. Whether sitting or walking, in formal meditation or walking in the woods, you hold the question moment after moment: what is being known? Just, what is being known?

In holding that question, you'll see a very rapid flow of different phenomena through all the sense doors. You're walking and the feeling of the body is being known, a sound is being known, a sight is being known, and then feeling the body again. Maybe you feel peaceful, and so that mind state is being known. With that question, it just allows us to settle back in a very open, receptive way to the whole range of phenomena happening through the six sense doors. In Buddhism, it's the five physical senses and the mind.

Then, as you're walking through the woods in that more open awareness, maybe you'll find that the mind's losing its steadiness and you're just getting carried away in thought trains. So then come back to a more directed awareness, feeling specifically the movement of the body, the movement of each step. In a way, it's the same practice whether you're in the woods or you're in the hall.

I think we need to go. There will be interviews scheduled. But I just want to leave you with a mantra of continuity that you can use to remind yourself. It's very simple—a two-word mantra: *Each step.* That's the mantra. Each step.

Remind yourself to be mindful of each step. And it's not only in walking meditation. It's going from the hall, leaving the hall, going to your walking spot. Each step. And what that will do—and you can even add this awareness—is work against the tendency, the very slight energetic tendency to be rushing or leaning forward, to be ahead of ourselves. Especially as we're in transition going from one place to another, it's just so common to think, "Okay, now I'm in my walking spot." But you were always in your walking spot. So don't wait. You don't have to wait for a special spot.

Each step.

Have fun.

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