Tracking the Thought-Stream (Workshop)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 52:27

In these morning workshops we're going through different aspects of the practice, and the practice is based on the framework of the four Satipaṭṭhānas.

When we begin, we spend a lot of time working on our relationship with the body because that's the first of the four Satipaṭṭhānas and it's the foundation for the practice. Then we move on to vedanā, feeling, which is so important that it gets its own Satipaṭṭhāna. And now we are entering into the third Satipaṭṭhāna: citta, usually translated as mind.

Here we come across what we were talking about before—that when the Buddha analyzes the human condition, he distinguishes between the cognitive aspect of the mind and the affective aspect. So roughly speaking: head, heart. Rationality, feeling. Today we're going to have a look at the mind, focusing on one aspect of the cognitive aspect of mind.

As you know, we're working with the basic framework laid out by Mahasi Sayadaw. In this lineage they talk about what we are aware of, the meditation object, in terms of grounding object and secondary object. The grounding object is the meditation object with a capital M and a capital O. This is what we focus on. This is the central reference point. This is where we learn to settle awareness and to keep it settled over a period of time.

What serves as the grounding object varies from person to person and from time to time, but it's important that we have a sense of it being our default position. Let's say we sit down to meditate. You think, what should I do in this sitting? Grounding object. It's the default.

But of course, inevitably, we're pulled away from it. When we're pulled away from it—okay, I've been dragged somewhere else—what is this? Secondary object. So: grounding, secondary. The secondary appears, at least in the early stages, as distraction—what pulls me away from the grounding object. As the practice develops, the whole relationship changes. The structure of grounding and secondary actually evaporates. When we practice, we're simply with whatever is happening, and whether it's grounding or secondary is completely irrelevant. But as we go through in these mornings, we're looking at it from the point of view of this structure of grounding and secondary.

Now, one area of human experience that people talk about as providing distraction is thinking. Has anybody here been distracted by thinking? One or two? Once or twice? Big tick on that one. It's a major source of distraction, particularly in our culture. I think other cultures don't have this as such a big deal because they're not so obsessed with their thinking. But in our culture, it is normal to be completely

obsessed with thinking. So this brings us to what we could call the thought stream—the endless stream of thought generated by the mind.

Now, thinking gets a bad press in meditation. You get the subtext: what I want you to do is sit there for an hour and don't think. There is actually a meditation exercise, which I used to do—I don't do it anymore—where basically we get people to sit down, settle awareness, and then: stop thinking. Don't think. That's the instruction. It's quite interesting what comes up as a result. But we won't do that today.

Thinking is just part of nature.

Thinking gets a bad press, but there's nothing wrong with it. It's just part of nature. Thinking is not the problem. The problem is our relationship to thinking—that we are obsessed with our thinking. In other words, our relationship to thinking is addictive.

If you have a friend who's fond of a particular substance, and if you feel that this substance they're very fond of is leading them down dangerous pathways and is basically bad for them, you might rouse up the courage to suggest, "Maybe you should think about dropping it. Because it seems to me you're a touch addicted." And your friend gets all upset and says, "I'm not addicted. I could stop any time I want." What would be your response? We'd think, "Oh, definitely addicted." That's the problem.

How many of us can just stop? When I was in Burma, at one point I was going through a lot of incredibly obsessive and generally painful thinking. I was doing this long retreat, and one of my fellow meditators—he had ordained as a monk temporarily—had gone off to a branch monastery. But he came back for a visit to do something at the main center where I was. We had a little chat and he asked, "How's it going?" I said, "It's going really, really badly. I just can't stop thinking." I talked about my difficulty, and he said, "Look, I've got the solution for you. It's basically very simple." I said, "Do you?" Because this guy was a very good meditator. "What's the solution?" He said, "I'll tell you what I do. I get up in the morning—wake-up time was like four a.m. or something—and I go outside to my walking meditation place. I stand at the beginning of the walking track and I make a determination, an adhiṭṭhāna: for the next two hours I will not think. And then I just do walking meditation for two hours without thinking. By then it's time for breakfast and I'm set up for the day." And I said, "Oh. Is that what you do? Thanks."

Most of us can't do that. So in this situation, what we need to do is start to get interested in the addictive relationship. It's not the thinking which is the problem. It's the relationship which is the problem. And that's what we need to investigate.

The mind is constantly throwing up thought sparks, like sparks from a fire—little thought moments. What happens is that the mind is kind of hovering around and it sees one of those little sparks, thinks it looks interesting, grabs it, and turns it into a story. And then we get absorbed into the story.

Now, why are these stories so entrancing? Why are they so addictive? They're entrancing because they're all about me. When we think, who do we think about? We think about me. We're not completely

narcissistic—we think about other people—but we think about them in relation to me. My friends. My enemies. My past. My future. My family. And so on.

It's all about me. And this is what makes thinking attractive, if not addictive. Thinking is a major way in which we build up, construct our view of ourself. In a sense, we are who we deeply think we are. And thinking solidifies that.

During that period of time when I was really wrestling with thought, I was approaching it through heroic effort. And gradually, gradually, gradually, the thinking level would decline. Until it reached the point where I really noticed that it was very close to disappearing. And at that point, what would arise was panic. And then, up goes the thought again.

I realized what was going on was fear. Who would I be if I wasn't thinking? Would I even exist? The mind was just horrified by this prospect. And in a panic, it immediately generated more thinking.

So I learned that a lot of this is about identity. And a lot of it is about habit—deeply ingrained habit. And identity and habit go together.

If we learn to track the thought stream, to use the thought stream as a meditation object, what this does is cut through our deeply ingrained determination to identify with the world created by thought. And it opens us up to a world beyond thought. This is the world that the Buddha called emptiness, sunyata, or not-self, anatta.

So let's have a look at how we go about doing that.

The basic principle is, as we've been discussing, that we're always dealing with a dyad of awaring and what is aware. Minding and what is minding. Awareness and its object. It's always that dyad we're working with. And as we've said, normally what we think is important is the object. So we have experiencing, which is an activity, and what we experience. All our lives, we've been projecting importance into what we experience. That to us is what's important, not the experiencing. So we tend to overlook it, although we can't have the one without the other.

This is particularly evident with thinking. Normally when we think, we assume that what is important is what we are thinking about—even when we know it's complete rubbish. We still, in that moment, think it's important. So we take for granted the activity of thinking, how we think.

But when we're tracking the thought stream, we're not interested in what we are thinking about. What we are thinking about is of no interest whatsoever. What we're interested in is the activity of thinking. We are interested in thinking, not thoughts. This is a very important distinction.

To get a sense of it, I always cite a passage in the writings of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj. He talks about meditation practice and compares it to a mother watching her child play with a favourite toy. So you have this image of the child and the toy. The child is completely caught up in the toy, completely absorbed with

it. And then just over here, there's the mother. She's not particularly interested in the toy. What she's interested in is the child playing with the toy. She's interested in the game, in the relationship. That's what she's focused on.

Normally, in our relationship to thinking, we are like the child—completely obsessed with the toy. Our job is to step back and become like the mother, watching the child play with the toy. We're interested in the play of thinking and our relationship with that play.

So the basic method is to find some aspect of the activity of thinking that is not the content of our thoughts, and make that our meditation object. We're going to play with this, doing some meditation experiments. Again, it's important that we have an attitude of play. Don't take them seriously. It does not matter what happens when we do these exercises. But it would be nice if we enjoyed ourselves as we play.

In each exercise, we begin by settling awareness in the body. At some point, I'll direct attention to some aspect of the thought stream. If you get lost in thinking, simply drop it and come back to the body. Once you settle, return to the exploration. That's what we'll be doing.

Let's begin.

Settle awareness in your body, constructing the meditation posture. Start with the sensations at the base of the body, finding the balance, then lift up through your spine. Let your chest open, your shoulders relax. Lifting up through the spine, up through the neck, up through the head—around that lift, relax down. Then settle into your normal meditation object.

Are you thinking?

If you are thinking, and if you know you are thinking, then thoughts must be appearing to you in some way. How do thoughts appear? Do they appear as words? Do they appear as visual images? Do they appear as feelings? Do they appear as combinations of these? As something else entirely?

Study the flow of these thoughts. Don't focus on their content—what they are about—but on their appearance, how they present themselves to you. How do thoughts appear?

So, how do they appear? How do you know you are thinking?

One student shares that it starts with a visual image—sometimes aided by a word, a name—but it begins with a perception, a recognition. You recognize that something's happening, then you put an image on it, and that may be supported by a word.

Another student describes how you build an image, or you see the image, then you get some words, and you might even see text, and then it just changes. So you start with a sense perception, then there's an image supported by words, and they entangle each other, and away you go.

Another student describes a more complex unfolding: it began with the words of the question itself,

hearing the words reverberate. Then other things started to add on—there was a bird, hearing the bird, a baby bird calling out—and an immediate response arose, a slight annoyance: "Oh, there's that little puppy bird again." There was an affective aspect as the entanglement began, starting with sound, then drawing in both words and visual images.

Images. Yes. Together? Yes.

I think sometimes there's a feeling that's present which makes my ability to see what's actually there somewhat vague. At some point I'll pick up a story about that feeling being there, but the feeling might just be something like, "Oh, I don't know if I'm doing this right." It's not actually the words—it's just a feeling. The feeling comes first, in this case.

I've done this experiment for a long time, and for most people it will be visual images, feelings, and words in different variations and combinations. And here we had something different: we had perception. The perception of the sound—this definitely came up twice.

So these three appear to be the main ways in which we think, and people have favourite ways. Usually there's a combination, but you get different weightings. For example, for me, I'm definitely a word man. I think in words.

For the fellow word thinkers: is there one voice or more than one voice? Does anybody have discussions, conversations between two separate entities? Some people have more than one person in there, having a chat. But some people, like me—I'm strictly a monologue person. My fundamental principle of thinking is that I never let anybody get a word in edgewise. I sometimes wonder whether that's why I became a teacher. Expounding seems to be my natural mental state, which is a bit of a worry, but what to do?

Now notice what we're doing here. We're just taking thought, but we're looking at an aspect of it which is not the content—it's not what it's about. In this case, it's the appearance. How do I know that I'm thinking? How does thought appear?

Normally, if thinking is going on, the awareness goes straight to the content, the story itself, and we take this for granted as being obvious. But here we ask you to try switching the aim from there to over here—to the appearance, how it appears.

So you notice that this is about aim, and this is about accuracy. This is what we've been practicing throughout this retreat, starting with the elements. We've been doing it with the body, getting a sense of what it means to be accurate with the awareness. Then we can bring that accuracy into the mind and start to tease apart the thinking process. This is the basic methodology, and we'll have just a couple more experiments to look at other possibilities.

"Yes, that sense of two voices in there talking back and forth. Invariably, there's one observing with an opinion or judgment—'that wasn't very kind' or 'return to the present'—that kind of thing. Catching that

commentary."

So you've got the chatter, but over here you've got the commentator. And the commentator is saying, "Oh, you should... that's good... no, that's not... what are you doing that for?" and so on and so forth. The commentator at the back.

Some meditators say this is the most stubborn aspect of thinking in meditation. Even when they've got a nice samādhi going and the mind is very quiet, still in the background there's someone commenting, "Oh, the mind is quiet now."

"Oh, that's good. Maybe I should try doing this." The commentator seems to be very ubiquitous, and people say very difficult to let go of. In some respects, the commentator is an expression of wisdom, of understanding—but it's coming out as thinking instead of just being able to be intuitive without the concept. Simply a knowing. A knowing that this is wholesome, this is unwholesome, without having to say "this is wholesome, this is unwholesome." The annoying commentator. A very common experience.

When you're monologuing, do you have an audience? Are you in specific spaces? Sometimes there's an explicit audience, sometimes there's no particular audience. And sometimes what I've done, when I realize I'm caught up in monologue, is I drop in the question: where's the audience? I can't even physically look around, but there is one. And then I can drop it. Because I have to convince myself there's an audience. The audience is conjured up, but that assumption that there's an audience is actually pretty weak, because there isn't one. By recognizing that, it helps to drop the monologue. Just ask: where's the audience?

Let's try another exercise. Here we're going to work with a question that I know has been bugging you for a long time, but you've always been afraid to ask. And this question is: where do you think?

Let's again settle into your meditation posture, constructing the posture from the ground up. Feel the contact of the base of the body and from there lift up through your spine. From there, settle into your usual meditation object.

Are you thinking? Turn your attention to the place where you think. This is similar to finding where physical sensations arise. The difference is that physical sensations have physical location, while the thought stream may not. People may experience their thoughts in the general area of the head, and it can be useful to begin there—but do not take anything for granted. Don't assume that you already know.

Where do you think? Is there a specific location? Is there more than one location? Does this location change? Or is there no location? Where do you think?

So where are those thoughts? The left side of the brain, with a connection going down into the heart. Inside the skull or outside? Inside and outside, going down into the heart. So there's a connection between the heart and the head. And they start in the heart and go up, so the thinking begins in the heart and goes

up to the left side of the brain. It really takes shape in the brain, but it starts in the heart.

Anyone else? In the eyes?

Yes. I have access to a 150-inch TV screen.

So visual or auditory as well?

No, not so much. Mostly visual. Probably 98% visual.

And is the screen in the eyes or outside the eyes?

Outside. Just outside. Pretty close.

So you get a close-up of the big screen.

Anyone else?

I had two locations, depending on the type of thought. The normal sort of energetic thinking just happened around the head. But feeling states and tiredness—when those are predominant, the thoughts were slower and they were coming from here, from the heart area. And with me, whenever I focus on my thinking or ask myself what my next thought will be, there are no thoughts. That's the quickest way to quiet the mind. But sometimes, if I want to focus on my breath or something in my body, the thinking will start up. And then if I focus on my thoughts, the awareness becomes very recalcitrant. The awareness goes to the body and there's an absence of thoughts.

So you've got energetic thoughts up in the head area. But the more emotive thoughts are located in the heart. The slow thoughts are here, and the energetic ones are up here. And then thought behaves bizarrely in that if you turn your awareness toward thought, the thoughts go away and the awareness settles nicely with the meditation object. But if you try to get to the meditation object, they go up into thinking. The mind is definitely recalcitrant.

So here we have another exercise in which we give ourselves something to do: Where is it? Did anybody fail to find any location at all? Some people find it difficult to track down any kind of location. Some people say, "I can't find it. I can't find any location." And then others will say, "It's not that I couldn't find it. It's that there is no location. Location does not apply. It's a category error to look for a location." Does anybody have that experience? A very clear sense that there isn't a location?

Possibly. I was thinking it's in the head, but maybe it's my perception that thoughts might be coming from there. I didn't feel anything in any particular location.

So you expected them to be in the head, but they weren't there. There's definitely a stream of words, but you couldn't pinpoint any location. It's possible that you just couldn't pinpoint it. But there's also the distinct perception that there definitely is no location—that location does not apply. This is a different

experience.

Some people will report that they hear a sound and that stimulates the thought, so it begins in the ear, and so on. But other people will say that's not their experience at all. So again, it's always a matter of the actual experience. We're not looking for the correct experience. We're just trying to clarify: What is the experience? And what is it today, this morning? It could be completely different this afternoon. You never worry about that. It's just: What is it right now?

But sometimes people are quite clear that location does not apply. In a sense, thinking is both everywhere and nowhere simultaneously. Location simply does not apply.

But again, it doesn't matter what the answer is. The point is that by asking the question, you're directing awareness to some aspect of thinking which is not the content. And if I'm directing awareness to some aspect of thinking that is not the content, then in that moment, I am not caught up in the content. Which means I am not caught up in my usual addictive relationship. I've cut through it. Maybe only for a few moments, but I've cut through it. And therefore, I'm weakening that addictive relationship.

We have time for another exploration. Let's try feeling—in other words, the basic question is: what does thinking feel like?

So again, establish your posture, constructing your meditation seat. And from there, settling into your normal meditation object.

Are you thinking? As thoughts cascade through your mind, don't concern yourself with what you are thinking, but how it feels to be thinking. Are you enjoying it? Is it pleasant? Do you dislike it? Is it unpleasant? Do you not care about it at all? Is it neither painful nor pleasant? How does it feel to think?

Okay, so how does it feel to think?

"That particular thing—all the spinning, when you stop on something. What do you call it? Like a lottery wheel. And the other image was the compost tumbler. That was my very first thought when you asked what it feels like: tumbling all over the place, and you're rubbish. Not being able to land on anything."

Anyone else? What does it feel like?

"Unacceptable."

Really nicely described.

"I find it really unpleasant. It feels like being caught up in a whirlpool. But thoughts that arose when I was simply responding to the wind—those were kind of lighter. It was like, 'Oh, I've noticed that.' And then I would get into more commentary, and then it became unpleasant."

So wind was pleasant and commentary was unpleasant.

"Yeah, just noticing what's happening outside felt very small, infinitely light."

"It felt like it was in the center of my head, right between the ears. It was tight, with tension. And then when it would drift off toward some commentary, it would drop down a little toward the throat. So it was slightly heading in that direction, like, 'Okay, I'm going to talk now.'"

So the whole thing was uncomfortable?

Generally.

But you also found a very specific location.

Yes, yes. It's uncomfortable, but it felt separate from a more unified experience. I didn't have this experience now, but when I see something that isn't kind, or I feel a barrier come up between myself and another, I can feel it in my heart—I feel like a contraction. It was sort of that kind of thing.

Yeah, good. Totally. I think for me it would tend to be on a thought—like I had an angry thought, and that's what I'm uncomfortable with, that kind of thing. But then I have this sense that all of a sudden you're in a state where you're spiritualized. It's interesting how when you're working on the feeling, the physical sensations also become more clear, more apparent for some people.

But again, it's a basic principle: find some aspect of the thinking process that is not the content, and make that the meditation object—in this case, feeling. Another possibility is the body. The question would be: do you think with your body? Does the body respond to the thinking? If so, how? These are all possibilities, but you see they're all illustrations of the basic principle. When you're caught up in thinking, number one, don't believe the story. Drop awareness out from the story, and then go into some aspect of the thinking process which is not the story, and zero in on it.

Now, you'll notice that mind is really, really quick. So it could be with these exercises that you only have to do it for a moment or two. It's like, "Oh, that's where it is," or "That's what it feels like," or whatever. And that can be enough. Then back to the grounding object. Or you might stay in there longer.

Generally, working with the thought stream is very high energy. A couple of you mentioned the energy of the thinking mind. And that means that using the thought stream as a meditation object, for most people, they can't do it for very long because they just get spun out. It becomes too much. So it's not suitable as a grounding object—for most people. Some people can, but they're a minority who would use it as a grounding object. But in the context in which we've introduced it, it can be useful to play with when you realize you're distracted by thinking.

And once again, the basic principle is: what is a distraction? It's a meditation object wanting your attention. So note it. Be aware of it. But when you're aware of the thought stream, it is very tricky. So it helps to have a sense of what you can actually do, how to be aware of it. And these are basic games to learn how to do that.

Is it worthwhile tracking back thoughts? Sometimes I find, once I've been lost in the stream for a while, I find it helpful to trace how I got here from there.

Yeah, that can be quite a useful exercise. The question would be: what happened just then? How did it begin? And then you track back, track back to the initial arising of the thought. Some people really like that—they do it a lot. And other people don't do it at all. But it can be quite a useful exercise. And it's the same principle. You're treating the thinking as a conditional process, as you point out, and you track it back. What sparked it, and how did it move from A to B to C?

Some thoughts can be quite bold. You notice it, and it could be half an hour later. And that is, you could say, from a meditation point of view, one of the most dangerous kinds of thoughts—the ones that suck you in completely.

But the important thing, even there, is that once you know you're thinking, then you can work with it. We do have this very common experience that we're thinking and we don't know we're thinking. At that point there's nothing I can do, because I don't know. But as soon as I know it—bang—I can bring awareness to it.

This is a vortex. This is a black hole. What does the black hole feel like? Where is the black hole? What is it doing? Is it light? Is it heavy? Is it attractive? Is it disturbing?

So we're always working in the present. What's happening now? And that gradually builds our relationship with the present, builds the capacity to simply be present.

Okay. Your mission, if you choose to accept it, is to stop thinking. But if you can't manage that, please be aware of your thinking process.

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