Tracking the Thought Stream (Practice)

Patrick Kearney · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Patrick Kearney · 59:47

This morning we're going to play around with tracking the thought stream.

We're doing what the Buddha calls satipaṭṭhāna, mindfulness meditation. There are four sections to this, covering four aspects of human experience—basically all experience. First is body, and we spend a lot of time focusing on body because that's the foundation. Then comes feeling, which we've been kind of skipping over. Next comes mind, and when we get into the mind, we've got, broadly speaking, the cognitive aspect of mind and the affective or feeling aspect of mind. One part of the cognitive aspect of mind is the mind's determination to generate thought—what we could call the thought stream, the seemingly endless stream of thought generated by the mind. The mind does this for various reasons, but mostly to create a meaningful self within her world.

Now, thinking can, for some meditators, occasionally be distracting. It is completely natural for the mind to generate thought. In fact, if it didn't, we would be in serious trouble. But what we tend to do is become obsessed with our thoughts and invest all our sense of reality into them, into the stories we're telling ourselves. This obsession becomes a major source of our suffering, and of course it becomes a major distraction in our meditation practice. Thinking is natural, but our addictive relationship to thinking is neither natural nor necessary. When we're using thinking as a meditation object, this is what we're actually targeting—our relationship to thinking.

When we look at what the mind does, it throws up what we could call thought moments, continually, like sparks coming off a fire. Our awareness moves in to capture any one of these little sparks, grabs it, and turns it into a story. These stories have enormous variety, but they all have one thing in common: the star of the story, which is, of course, me. And despite the fact that these stories often contradict each other, for as long as they're playing themselves out, we believe them.

We might come into the meditation hall and have a really difficult meditation practice, just struggling and sweating and writhing and squirming. Every now and again we look around and everyone's completely still, eyes closed, blissful expressions on their face. One finds oneself telling a story: "I must be the worst meditator in this room. I must be absolutely bloody hopeless compared to these other people." We go out distressed, discouraged, have a nice cuppa, take a walk, take a break, come back in, sit down, and we're away—deep in the meditation practice, time passes. At the end, the bell goes, and we look around. These people have looks of relief on their face after they've heard the bell. And we tell ourselves a story: "I must be the best meditator in this hall." Despite the fact that one of these stories obviously cannot be true—it's extremely unlikely that either of them are true—yet while they're running, we believe them. We construct

a sense of reality and a sense of self out of them. This relationship is the problem.

The payoff, of course, is that the stories give us a sense of identity. They tell us who we are and what the world is. This is why they are so entrancing. Tracking the thought stream, turning thinking into a meditation object, subverts our determination to identify with the world created by thought. It throws up the possibility of experiencing a world beyond thought and beyond concept—the world of emptiness and not-self. This is what we're going to play around with this morning.

As we've talked about, normally when we think, we assume that what is important is what we are thinking, what we are thinking about, while we completely take for granted the activity of thinking—how we think, how we construct a thought stream. But when we're tracking the thought stream, we are not interested in what we are thinking about. That is of absolutely no concern whatsoever. What we're interested in is the activity of thinking. In other words, we are interested in thinking, not thoughts.

There's a little passage in the writings of Sri Nisargadatta Maharaj where I think he sums up what we're trying to do. He compares the meditation practice to a mother watching her child play with a favorite toy. The child is absorbed with the toy, absolutely entranced by it, captured by it, you could say. The mother sees the toy, but that's not what she's really interested in. What she's interested in is the child playing with the toy. She's interested in the game itself.

So she's taken a step back and she's got a wider view. And when we track the thought stream, we are not interested in the contents of our thoughts—these are the toy. We're interested in their play, and our relationship to that play.

The basic method involves a series of brief exercises. They will be brief because thinking is a high-energy meditation object, and particularly in the early stages, we don't want to try to stay with it for too long. The basic method is this: find some aspect of the activity of thinking that is not the content of our thoughts, and make that the meditation object.

As I said, we're going to do a series of brief exercises, and it's really important that we play with these. Do not take them seriously, but be playful. Remember, it doesn't matter what result we come up with—that's irrelevant. But it would be nice if we enjoyed ourselves while we did it.

In each exercise, we're going to begin by settling awareness in the body. Then at some point, we'll be asked to direct our awareness to some aspect of the thought stream. If we get lost in our thoughts, we come back to the body, settle awareness again, and then return to the thought stream.

So we're tuning into the vibe of the thought stream, the feeling tone of it. That's one possibility—that would be one aspect of the thought stream, its feeling tone. We may or may not get that far, but that's actually a good one: what does it feel like to think? That's a very good question.

But the first question we're going to start with is this: how do you know you are thinking?

Settle with subtle awareness in your body, constructing your meditation posture. Settle into the contact of the base of the body, and from there lift up through the spine. Have your head balanced, relax your shoulders. And settle your awareness 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, or as something else altogether?

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?

"A tedious monologue."

A monologue, with a quality of tediousness attached. Incessant, perhaps.

"It's just constant. The monologue appears frequently, and it's almost as though I can feel the words forming in the back of my throat as they're forming in my head."

Do you have an audience for them?

"At times, yes. At other times, no. It's perhaps me talking to me."

I'm a monologist myself. Sometimes when people say it's mostly in words, I usually ask: is there a dialogue, or is it a monologue? Some people have dialogues, but I'm strictly monologue.

No one else gets a word in edgeways.

Anyone else? How did it appear?

So you have different ones that pop up and then they're connected, and then when you go off again, does that mean you develop that or you start all over again?

Hmm. And when you're putting all that together, what are you putting together? Are you putting words together or images together or both or feelings?

Words, images, feelings, everything. The whole package. All sorts of different things.

And so they're popping up all over the place and then you bring them together and off you go constructing something from it.

Yeah, good.

Very vivid imagery, like a dream, though I'm kind of more conscious of them than a dream. And that's just general thoughts, but then if there's a more analytical thought, it's a murky kind of image of my internal

self.

So images, and when you engage in analytical thought, the images become more murky?

Yeah, because it's like an internal dialogue with myself. So it's like maybe it's an image of my brain or something.

But this dialogue is via images? What's going on inside the mind is all via images?

What do you mean?

Well, it's images that are—what's happening as you're thinking about something, it's images. Sometimes they're clear, sometimes they're not.

And then it changes slightly when it's more of a dialogue.

Are there still images in the dialogue, or words?

It's like a murky, dark space, which is kind of an image. But basically, you don't really know. It's vividly clear when it's just general thought, but then when you're thinking about something, it becomes murky, and you're not quite sure what's going on.

Yeah, good.

I have the sense of a thought space, and it can move on in different ways, but it often doesn't come together in any clear proposition. And at one point, I had the sense that my thinking was actually a feeling with a question mark at the end.

So you can see different things happen in different minds, which is interesting. But you notice the point of the exercise was focusing in on thinking—not being concerned with what we're thinking about, but with how thinking presents, how it appears.

The three modalities we mentioned were words, images, and feelings, because in the years that I've been doing this exercise, these are the three predominant things that people report. Occasionally someone will report something different, but those three seem to be predominant.

What we're doing is bypassing the content. We're not interested in what we're thinking about. We're shifting the aim to the appearance of the thought.

Now, that shift in the aim is very precise. It's taking the awareness—instead of being absorbed where it's normally absorbed—and going, no, I'll just go right here. When we were doing the elements yesterday, we were talking about how in insight meditation practice, we're trying to develop precision in the awareness. And this is an example of it.

If I'm going to go into the mind and look at thinking as a meditation object—now, normally when people

first hear about this idea, they assume it must mean, oh, I just keep thinking but I'm aware of my thinking, because of the habit of identifying with the content. But actually, it's much more subtle than that. It's a shift of the aim away from the content, the story, to some aspect of how the story is being constructed. In this case, the appearance—how it appears.

Does that make sense?

This is the basic method. So you can see it's very delicate, very precise. And normally, particularly if you're new at it, you can't do it for very long. It's like you stumble over it—you lose the balance and bang, you're back in the content.

In the basic context in which we're working, we've got grounding object and secondary object. So we settle into the grounding object. But at some point we're distracted, so we make that the meditation object—not necessarily for very long. In this case, thinking will be the secondary object. I'm distracted by thinking. Whoops, I'm thinking. Bring your awareness to it, again to some aspect of the thinking which is not the content. Okay, that's what it is—and then come back.

So you might only be there for a few seconds. Particularly in the early stages, if you try to stay too long, you'll just get caught up in it. But you just have a look. Okay, this is how it is, and then come back. And in this case, we were looking at the appearance of the thought.

Shall we try another one? This time we're going to investigate the question which I'm sure has kept you up at night on more than one occasion: Where do you think?

Guided meditation begins

Once more, settle into your meditation posture, constructing your posture from the ground up. And from there, settle into your normal 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 don't take anything for granted. Don't assume that you 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?

Meditation ends

So where are they?

Student responds: They're close by. They're not too far away. You can feel it kind of bubble up. Maybe it was a bit quick, but it felt like it was here, and then it was here, and then it was kind of like some rambling in the background, kind of faint sense of some kind of meaning around here. So it was close by.

But outside the body?

Student: Yeah, outside that.

Outside the body, but close by, and generally fairly high up in the body. So you felt it in the ear?

Student: That area, yeah.

But if it's a concept, it's internally generated. That's very, very internal. So it's still pretty internal even if it appears external. So it's sort of inside the head or around the ear for the morning?

Student: But concepts kind of make meaning inside my head.

So the concept's inside the head or further down?

Inside the head. So it's all happening in or very close to the head.

"But if it's conceptual..." someone began.

That's not conceptual—that's direct experience. A concept would be something made up, constructed. So direct experience is located where the sensation is located, but concepts tend to move up into the head area. And it would be lovely, I think it could be really helpful, if those concepts could just fragment and dissipate through your body.

We've already gotten onto this—the connection between the body and thinking. It's quite interesting.

"If it's an external thing," one practitioner shared, "I feel like my thought goes a long way out to that thing, whatever it is. And if it's a thought that creates a feeling, it goes straight to the body. For example, anxiety—if I have an anxious thought, it seems to happen so quickly. I don't know what comes first, the thought or the anxiety feeling in my body. It's almost as though the thought immediately goes to a part of my body."

That could be the feeling that regenerates the thought. So when it's an affective thought, like anxiety, then the physical sensation, the feeling, and the thought are all very closely linked, all located in the body. But a thought about something external will tend to be located outside. So different kinds of thoughts have different locations.

"When I'm trying to look at them," another person observed, "it actually feels like the thinking stops. I'm sure it doesn't, but it feels like it stops. And I realize a thought has come only in retrospect, but it feels like it's coming from the other side."

So you've got the back of the mouth and the palate, but when you look at thoughts, they tend to hide. It's not that they're gone—they're just hiding away. And as soon as your glance goes somewhere else, there they are. They're shy. It's understandable.

A few people have said over the years that thought for them actually begins in the heart and moves up to the head. Anybody find that?

"I had a distinction between where thinking was and where the thoughts were," someone offered. "Thinking was... and sometimes they move up and down. But the activity of thinking is located here, while the production is out there."

Now, you probably want to know which are the correct answers and which are the wrong answers, because there are wombat stamps involved here. Every answer is correct. It's just how you experience it. And with thinking, it can be a bit weird—you can get completely different situations at different times. That doesn't matter.

What matters is the game. The thought arises, and habit says: go to the content, live within the content. But the practice is no—look at some other aspect. For example, where is it?

Anybody fail to find a location?

One person indicated yes.

Anybody come to the conclusion that it's not that you could not find the location, but that thoughts have no location? That location simply does not apply?

"Something like that," someone responded. "You were talking about them hiding away. They were, but when I think about it, it was when I was trying to locate them—I went, oh... not really. Not really available in some way."

Because there's a difference between "I'm looking for something but I can't find it" versus "no, it's very clear to me, location does not apply." Both can be true. One can have all sorts of experiences. Sometimes that's the response that people have. And again, at one point there's absolutely no location. At another point, there is, right there. The experiences vary wildly. There's no right experience.

But notice what we're doing—we're playing a game with aim. We're deliberately sending the aim at some aspect of the thought stream which is not the content.

Now let's look at something which has popped up already, but essentially the physicality of thought. Do you think with your body?

So once more, settle awareness in your posture and settle into your normal meditation object. Are you thinking? Do you think with your body? In other words, does your body respond to your thinking? For example, do you feel any tension in your body as you think? You might check for sensation in the area of

your face. Is there tightness in your jaw? Is there tension in your forehead? Alternatively, do you relax when you think? Does your posture change when you slide into thinking? For example, you may find you slump slightly. Look for how your body responds to your thinking. Do you think with your body?

Okay, is the body involved?

"Definitely. I just always find that thought and body have such a strong connection, and I cannot work out sometimes whether—or sometimes it's clear that thought has quickly triggered a body sensation or a bodily sensation."

That's an interesting one. Sometimes we get a clear sense that this is related to that. But which one came first? Sometimes it seems that one comes first, and other times it seems this one comes first. But it's very useful. Again, if you've got a sense of the embodiment of thinking, then that gives you a handle which is not the content, not the story. So you can track a thought without getting caught in the content. And you may even find you don't know what the content is if you're just really with the physicality of it.

"I often find my chin rises, my head goes back a little. I bring my chin down, my thinking stops."

So when thought comes up, chin goes up. Chin comes down, thought cuts. That's very useful.

"I have the opposite—I tend to contract, curl down."

And what happens when you notice that?

"I don't really notice it actually, but I notice it because of this exercise."

I often get—I should say I used to, it hasn't happened for a bit—but the thought will come up the back of the spine here. And there's a kind of curving, a slight curving of the spine and pressure here. And if I do the opposite, then the thought vanishes. So it's all in the body. There's been a period of time when that's been the case because experience has changed.

Anybody find that they relax when they think?

"Well, I tried to relax. I made my primary object just being relaxed. And I noticed that the thinking was there. It was quite subdued. It didn't really change the feeling of the body. And I could just kind of sit with a relaxed body."

So when you look for the feeling, the feeling is embodied. The thinking itself tends to have a quality of disembodiment about it. But the feeling of thought—that's in the body. That can bring you into the physicality, and it's very calm.

Another practitioner shared a different discovery: "There was a sense of suspicion that came up, like a playful suspicion. Kind of like if a mother has just told her child to pack the toys away, and as soon as the mother turns away, the kid starts pulling them back out again. So that kind of feeling—'What do you think

you're getting up to?'"

So you had a playfulness about it?

"Yes, with that tone of suspicion."

Oh, good. Maybe you found the means of staying with the thought stream.

I'm so glad we played that last game, because I didn't realise—

I know I used the word tedious before, but I'm going to backtrack on that. I didn't realise how much I enjoy thinking. And it seems to give me, in inverted commas, a reality that I may never be able to achieve in the real world, because I can be whoever I want to be when I'm thinking. There's something really intensely satisfying about that.

I also do a lot of rehearsing when I'm thinking. I'm rehearsing what I've got coming up next in life, whatever. And it feels almost like the future me is thanking me for doing that thinking right now—"that was really useful, rehearsing." So again, there was a feeling of satisfaction that came with it: I'm doing something good by putting this effort into thinking. I didn't realise it was as enjoyable and satisfying as it is. I know there were some thoughts in that time just then that were not so satisfying, but the overall flavour was surprisingly enjoyment and satisfaction.

So now you know why you think a lot. It's pretty obvious, isn't it? But it's not necessarily helpful—except sometimes it is, because it's helpful in your office.

When the Buddha talks about tracking an object which is more affective than cognitive, he says look for what he calls the *āsāda* and the *ādīnava*. Look for the gratification. What am I getting out of this? There's something in it for me, otherwise I wouldn't be doing it. What is that? So that's the pleasure, the satisfaction. But he says when you're familiar with that, then do the flip side: what's the disadvantage of it? And being clear about that as well, so you get a balanced response to pleasure and pain.

A participant asked about not engaging with content, finding it a little confusing. Because to know what you're getting out of thinking, there seem to be different categories of thought—would you want to know the content?

Sometimes. This is a specialised meditation exercise. Sometimes the content is important—it's like I've got to figure something out. But what a lot of people find is that most of the thinking they do is actually completely unnecessary.

The example I like to give is that over decades I have trained my mind—it used to be three times a day, but now it's just two—for the mind to throw up the thought "it's time for another cup of coffee." What happens is there will be the arising of the knowing "time for another cup of coffee," and then I will explain to myself "it's time for another cup of coffee." Now that explanation is completely unnecessary. I already

know, but I have to tell myself.

So a lot of our thinking is in that field where we don't really need it. We already know. But sometimes we do need to talk it through, as it were, with ourselves in order to figure it out. That thinking is necessary, and it's good.

But here, because we're working in the context of doing a meditation practice where I tend to be distracted by thought—if I'm going to solve a problem, I'll do it after the retreat. I won't do it during the retreat. I won't think about it now. So here, in a retreat context, most of the thinking that we do is completely useless. So don't go for the content. Go for this. That's the basic technique. But that doesn't mean that all content is bad or useless. Sometimes content is good.

And what you find, if you practise and get a handle on the thinking process, is that over time the quantity of thinking will decline while the quality will go up. Because generally the more quantity there is, the poorer the quality. So in terms of your daily life, you might find a whole different relationship. You might find that you think less, but what you think is much more useful than what you were thinking before.

But the other thing is the more intuitive capacity of the mind—where the mind can know something without going "blah, blah, blah."

that direct connection with the knowing capacity of the mind without all the mental chatter getting in the way.

One practitioner shared an observation: "I was noticing that the talk arises in my mind and it's got a slightly different shape from what it had last time it arose. And next time it will have a different shape, and it's becoming more resolved. The production of the thought is essential for the continuing work that's going on, but it's not an end point in any way. It's just a sign that things have moved on."

I think that unconscious work is exactly what gets more developed through meditation practice. This is the wisdom factor at play.

Another question arose: "You mentioned at the beginning that contemplating the thought stream gave you a sense of emptiness or not-self. Can you say more about what you meant by that?"

The reason we're addicted to thought is because we're addicted to self. We use thinking to prop up the self. For the Buddha, the self is a construction project—and it's never actually finished. It's like renovators or builders. I don't know about your experience, but my experience is that the closer builders come to the conclusion of a project, the more they slow down. There's this horror in their minds of actually finishing something.

So there's this constant construction project going on, but it's really, really fragile—like it could collapse if I'm not paying attention to it all the time. The thought stream is this constant propping it up, patching it up, fixing it here, putting a bit there. That's why there's such resistance to not thinking.

Sometimes people will report this directly. On the one hand, they'll say, "Oh, if only I could find peace and the mind stops thinking in my meditation—that would be great." But then they get to a point where the thinking actually does stop, and the effect is, "Oh my God, what's going on? I'd better think about this!" There's a horror of this empty space.

It's like in our culture—it's clear that people are really distressed by silence. You go into any pub or any restaurant, and they're designed to be noisy. There's always something going on. It's as if the business owners know that if they want to lose money, they should provide an environment that's quiet. People will just run. They've got to have noise.

The mind is like that too. Meditators will find resistance to dropping thought because they feel a sense of insecurity without it. Who am I if I'm not thinking?

But when you actually can drop the thinking, when you're at ease without thinking, you have a clearer sense of life simply flowing under its own conditions—without me constantly having to jump in and take command. It's taking care of itself. And this is the sense of not-self.

I remember back when I was in Burma, I would go through these epic cycles of just endless thinking. At one time, my meditation practice basically consisted of wrestling thinking to the ground. I would get to the point where I could feel that the level of thinking was subsiding, really dropping. And then suddenly, panic would arise in the mind. Bang! And the thoughts were back again.

That really alarmed me. On the one hand, I really wanted to drop thinking. On the other hand, the last thing on this planet that I wanted was to stop thinking. Because then, who am I?

That's when I realised just how identified with thinking I was. So that was quite weird.

It's 10 o'clock.

So your mission, should you choose to accept it, is to be aware of your thought stream.

Now, again, play with it. Do not take any of this seriously. If you take it seriously, you make it heavy. Don't make it heavy. Play with it. Be interested. Enjoy it.

And when you go into the thought stream, don't stay there for very long. Partly because this is a very high energy practice and you can spin yourself out. Mind is incredibly energetic. And if you get in there and study it, then it can spin you out.

So you just go in, have a look, come out, back to the body. And then when you find yourself caught up in thinking again, go in, have a look, back to the body.

You're getting used to a landscape and learning how to visit it, find your way around, and exit.

So play with it. It can be quite useful.

Thank you very much.

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