

Mindfulness Meditation Introductory class
Week Four: Mindfulness of Thoughts
By Andrea Fella

The basic instruction for mindfulness practice is to be clearly aware of what is happening in the present moment, whether it is body sensation, emotion, thought. But for most of us, the mind is a bit too busy to simply sit down and immediately be able to bring full conscious awareness with our present experience. So, we cultivate an anchor for our attention. For most of us, the breath works well as an anchor. We practice with a dedicated intention to stay with that one object in order to settle and quiet the mind.

Other experiences may arise in the background of our experience. That is, we may be aware of other things happening, but they don't necessarily pull our attention away from our anchor. In that case, it is fine to leave them in the background, and continue with the breath in the foreground.

But eventually, something will push itself into the foreground of attention. When something becomes more compelling than the breathing, we let go of the breathing, and bring our full mindful attention to that thing, whether it is a body sensation, an emotion, or thinking.

Sometimes, random thoughts pull us away from the breath; suddenly we find we are not with the breath. Much of the time, all that is necessary is to clearly notice that we are now thinking, and then to consciously direct the attention back to the breathing. At other times, our minds are not so easily directed. In that case, we bring our attention to the thinking process.

In mindfulness meditation, there is no need to look for thoughts. Instead, as we have been doing for the past few weeks, stay with the breathing until something makes it difficult to stay with the breathing. Then bring your full attention to that, be it body sensations, emotions, or thoughts.

Thoughts and Reactivity to Thoughts

One function of the mind is to produce thoughts. Another of its functions is to experience them. Much as the eye receives sight, and the ear receives sound, so the mind receives thoughts.

Thoughts happen in our mind. They arise based on causes and conditions: based on what we have done in the past hour, day, or year; based on who we have met; based on our mood, or because we are experiencing something similar to something we've experienced before. They also arise out of other thoughts: thoughts lead us to other thoughts.

Thoughts aren't usually simply a neutral experience for us; we tend to react to our thoughts. When a thought of a charged situation arises as a memory, a reaction to that thought can result in feeling difficult emotions. We also react to ideas about what might happen in the future.

Our work in mindfulness is not necessarily to still the mind, to stop thinking, though at times this can happen in meditation. Rather, mindfulness helps to make our thoughts conscious. Mindfulness can bring fleeting thoughts into our awareness, and we begin to see that we do have a choice in whether or how we react to them. Unseen, the thoughts may generate habitual reactions, patterns of thought or behavior.

Attending to Thoughts

In meditation, thoughts often come as a drifting away from our experience. We simply find we are thinking about something, and didn't notice when our awareness drifted from our object of attention. In these cases, it is usually enough to clearly recognize that thinking is happening: noting "drifting, or wandering, or thinking" and simply let it go, and come back to the breath. This is using mindfulness –

clearly recognizing the mind is thinking, and name it. There is no need to sustain the thinking simply to pay attention to it!

At other times, thoughts are more compelling. We find ourselves lost in them. We let go a couple of times, and find the same theme keeps re-appearing in our mind.

When thoughts are strong, and they have a powerful hold on our mind, we can use mindfulness to investigate the thinking. This means seeing what is happening in the body and the mind in the present moment, while the thinking is occurring. It does not mean to investigate the contents of the thoughts, to analyze the story, or think about why you might be having this thought. It means turning our attention to our present moment experience.

It can be helpful to clearly recognize and note the *type* of thinking that is happening: the overall theme. For example: planning, remembering, arguing, judging, fantasizing, or describing. It can also be helpful to notice the tone of the “voice” of the noting. Whose voice it is? Is there an emotion in the tone of voice?

When thoughts are strong, or when a mental theme keeps replaying, see if there is an emotion associated with those thoughts, such as fear, anger, or even happiness. When an emotion is present it can trigger thoughts.

For example planning thoughts might be based in anxiety. Judgmental thoughts can be based in many kinds of emotions. For example, they might be based in feelings of unworthiness (I’m no good, every one else is better) or superiority (I’m better than everyone else.).

If you can find an emotion that underlies the thoughts, ground your attention in the emotion. The emotion wants attention, and thoughts are one way an emotion tries to grab your attention. Bring your full attention to the emotion; often the stream of thinking associated with it will stop once the emotion is fully felt. Practice with the emotion, grounding your attention in the bodily sensations that accompany the emotion.

Whether or not you can identify an emotion related to strong patterns of thought, there is often an energetic feeling in the body when thoughts are strong. Centering attention in the body can be a very helpful way to disengage from the pattern of thinking. You might experience pulsing or buzzing in the head, a contraction in the abdomen, or tightness in your limbs, tension around the eyes or in the forehead. Attending to the physical sensations serves two purposes. It helps you to see the link between the mind and the body, and it also helps to cut the momentum of being caught in the content of the thoughts.

Contents of thinking vs. the process of thinking

The *content* of thinking is the actual story, for example, what he said, what she said, what I did, what I’m going to do, what I’d like to do.

The *process* of thinking is how thinking happens in the mind. Thoughts are often perceived as visual or auditory images in the mind.

Our auditory thoughts may manifest as a sense of hearing the thought, or perhaps of speaking the thought (talking to ourselves). It can sometime feel like listening to a radio – where there doesn’t seem to be much connection between us and the thought. Our visual thoughts may be like photographs, or silent movies, or even talking movies. Occasionally I’ve seen the words like reading a book.

We can notice how thoughts appear, persist, change and disappear. We can notice how observing thoughts affects them.

You can use the noting practice to acknowledge the process of thinking rather than the content. For example, if thoughts are arising a visual images, you could use the note “seeing,” which connects with

how you are experiencing the thought. If thoughts arise as if you are hearing, you could use the note “hearing.”

With the sharpening of mindfulness to see thoughts themselves, we begin to see just how ephemeral they are. They are practically nothing, light. Yet when we don’t see their true nature, we believe them and we perceive them with a weight and reality they don’t actually possess.

Exercises for the week:

- (1) Continue daily sitting. Focus on breathing in a concentrated manner (letting go even of compelling things) to settle and quiet the mind initially, then after 5-10 minutes, switch to a more open form of awareness, in which you remained focused on the breathing, but shifting the attention if something else becomes more compelling. If things seem complicated, stick with the breath and the body. Our emotions and thoughts can both be experienced through bodily sensations.
- (2) Once or twice during the week, pay attention to your intention to end the meditation. Jack Kornfield suggests an excellent practice for this:

From Jack Kornfield’s *A Path with a Heart* p.100:

In your daily meditation practice, make a resolve that for one week you will not get up until a strong impulse to do so arises three times. Sit as you usually would, being mindful of your breath, body and mind. But do not set a fixed time for the end of your meditation. Instead, sit until a strong impulse tells you to get up. Notice its quality. It may arise from restlessness, from hunger, from knee pain, from thinking about how much you have to do, or the need to go to the bathroom. Softly name the energy that has arisen, and with it sense the impulse to move. Feel it carefully in your body, naming, “wanting to get up, wanting to get up,” staying with it for as long as it lasts. (This is rarely more than a minute.) Then after this impulse has passed, notice what it feels like now, and if your meditation had deepened from sitting through the whole impulse process. Continue to sit until a second impulse to arise pulls you strongly. Notice the whole process in the same way as before. Finally after a third time of carefully being with the whole impulse process, allow yourself to get up. The depth of your attention and centeredness will gradually grow through this practice.

If you wish, you can extend your observation to other strong impulses, noting the whole process of wanting to scratch an itch, or to move while sitting...