

Practice Note: Can You Relax Your Thinking Muscle?

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on November 3, 2010

One of the things that many people take as a challenge for their meditation and mindfulness practice is their thinking. The reason for this is that it's, more often than not, our absorption in our thinking that pull us away from being present. Sometimes, people have an adversarial relationship with their thoughts because they want to be present. They want to be present with the breath, or to just be present, and their thinking takes them away.

What we try to do in this practice is to not have an adversarial relationship with anything. Rather, we try to learn how to do aikido or judo with whatever's going on. My understanding of the principle of judo or aikido is that you work with what's going on rather than against it. Someone comes and is going to hit you, and rather than resisting the force of their hit, you go along with it. You take it, and pull it along, and use their momentum to maybe throw them off balance. Being mindful of our thinking is not meant to be a fight. The idea is that we turn towards what's going on, and somehow engage, or are present for what's happening, so that the energy, the force of it, is not something that we're opposed to, but actually becomes something that can be transformed into something that's more useful for us.

When thinking is repetitive and we're really caught up in it, it's useful to clearly turn towards it, and be very present for it – to look at it directly and see it for what it is. You can use the mental note, "Thinking, thinking" – but not casually. Sometimes meditators do this casually, as if they are trying to brush it off and get back to where the real thing is. But to consciously and clearly acknowledge, "Thinking. Thinking is happening now," or "This is what thinking is like." Really see it, and acknowledge it, in a full clear way.

When we are fully there and present for it, one of the most useful things to do, if you can, is to feel what thinking is like. What does this phenomenon, the activity of thinking, feel like for you: physically, energetically, and emotionally?

One of the things I've found very useful is to turn towards the bodily location where the thinking seems to occur. If people are thinking in words, then there's often a loud speaker somewhere in the body, which is projecting or speaking those words. Some people have a sense that there's no location at all. But there's usually someplace where the loud speaker is, or where the antenna that picks up the sounds is. Or there are images; some people think more in images. Then there's a place where there's the screen where those images are projected, because you are looking and you're seeing the images someplace.

Sometimes by locating the activity of thinking, and then, once you've located it, you feel that phenomenon, as if there's a muscle that's doing the thinking. Feel what it's like. Feel yourself into it. Is there any pressure, or tension, that seems to come together with the thinking you're doing? Is there any agitation that seems to come with it?

Really feel. Take your time to really feel the pressure; feel the tension; feel the agitation. And then, as you go back to your breathing, check in with your breath and relax. See if you can soften that thinking muscle, because with almost all thinking, especially if it's repetitive or strong enough to get you caught up in it, there's going to be some physical pressure, tension, or strain that comes along with it. Sometimes it's in the place where you do your thinking. Sometimes it's someplace else in your body. It might be in the belly. If you can then soften and relax the thinking muscle, then you're much less likely to start thinking again, because if the pressure is still there, it is ready to produce more thoughts. If you let go of your thoughts without relaxing the pressure, that pressure is going to spin out more thoughts.

Look around and see what can you relax in your thinking muscle, if that vocabulary works for you. For some people, it could be in the brain, the forehead, inside the skull, or around the eyes. Sometimes it can be in the shoulders or the belly. Is there some tension or pressure in the body that's associated with this thinking? And then soften it; relax.

Look at thinking directly. Recognize it's there; acknowledge it's there. Find out where it might be in the body – someplace physical that you can soften and relax. Then go back to your breathing. Or go back to your steps as you do the walking meditation.