

Dharmette: The Grip of Thinking

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

Anybody who does meditation has to – sooner or later – become wise about their thinking. One of the consequences of becoming wise, hopefully, is to become friendly towards your thinking. To look upon it kindly, sympathetically, or compassionately – as opposed to the adversarial relationship of being upset with it, or angry with it. It's easy to be upset or aversive towards our thinking. One reason is that thinking is a force that takes us away from the present moment. And so if we want to be present, that seems to be what we're struggling against.

Other reasons are that, sometimes what we're thinking about is not necessarily in our best interests. Sometimes our thinking is not particularly praiseworthy. Some people are bothered by what they think. They can have a lot of judgements, or anger, or strange fantasies – it could be anything. So it's difficult to contend with these inner voices that keep bubbling up. You just want to be free of it. Enough of this! Enough of these kinds of messages. So to hear about being friendly towards it may sound like you're supposed to accept it too much.

What it means to me to be friendly towards our thinking is to have a kind relationship to it: not to be angry or upset. It means not being bothered by it. But it also means not being pushed around by our thoughts, and to be able to see a thought as a thought – to see it clearly for what it is.

Part of the challenge around thinking is the way in which thinking can often camouflage itself. Sometimes thinking is built with its own camouflage, so that it can't be seen. It's like a black hole. The theory of a black hole is that black holes have this tremendous gravitational force, so any light that goes into the black hole doesn't come out. You can't see the black hole because you can't see any light coming out. Thinking can be like a black hole. Our awareness goes into it, and gets trapped there, and doesn't come out, so we don't even know we're thinking.

It's interesting to study the gravitational pull that keeps us absorbed in thinking – the tremendous attraction that we have to thinking. I think it's so strong that it qualifies as an addiction. Some people – certainly not any of you [laughs] – but there are some people in the world for whom the way they relate to thinking really qualifies as addiction. They're more addicted to that than they are any other addiction because they're so caught up in their thinking: focusing on it, lost in it, involved in it. And the question is: Why? What is that force that keeps us so glued to thinking? What is the attraction? What's the gravitational pull that keeps us so connected? Why are we so interested? Why so fascinated with it? Why do we give so much authority to the inner voices that bubble up? Why do they seem so incredibly important?

I don't want to answer for any of you. I think that's really a task for you. But if you look into that, just the very investigation of it, is doing something radical for your mind. Asking the question, "Why am I so attracted to my thoughts?" means that while you are asking that question and looking into it, you've stepped back, and you're doing something very different than how the mind normally operates. For many people who don't have a practice, the mind spins along for a lifetime without ever being questioned, without ever stepping back and looking at the nature of how the mind itself works. Once you step back and investigate, "What's actually going on here with my thinking?" – then it's a whole different ecology really, a whole different ecosystem or event.

In this practice, we step back in a sense: "What's really happening here? Why am I so interested? What's the attraction that goes on?" One of the interesting ways of exploring that, is to ask, "What's the emotion, or the feelings, that seem to be intimately connected to that interest, that fascination, that pull we have, to keep coming back and thinking and thinking and thinking?" Often there's an emotional glue that keeps it connected. It's not uncommon for it to be a sense of insecurity or fear, and we're trying to make ourselves safer. We just try to think ourselves into a safe solution, into the right understanding so that we'll be safe. So we're always trying to figure things out, or trying to comfort ourselves. There's a tremendous desire to be comfortable, or to have pleasure, which can be very strong. That is the glue.

Sometimes the glue has to do with issues of self, pride, or conceit, trying to prove or disprove ourselves. Conceit can also take the form of trying to put ourselves down, and make ourselves be the victim, someone who's unworthy. Or it can be trying to pump ourselves up. How does this sense of self, in trying to create, destroy, or

negotiate a sense of self-identity, create the glue that keeps us constantly engaged with our thinking?

To study, "What is the glue? What keeps us going?" is a fascinating exploration. And then to appreciate how strong that addiction is. It isn't just the fact that we're thinking, but it's the tremendous power of thinking, or the pull to the world of thinking, which is separate from whatever we're thinking about. How do we work with that pull? How do we not allow ourselves to be pulled in, or so addicted to our thinking?

One of the very interesting things to do is to use thinking to overcome the addiction to thinking. The way to do that is, you find yourself thinking about something, and you say, in a slightly emphatic inner voice, "I'm thinking about lunch." You're obsessing about lunch. "Right now, here's a person thinking about lunch. This is thinking about lunch." You say that sentence, and say it strongly, maybe repeatedly, until saying that sentence seems to be more where you are rooted than the actual thought you had about lunch. If the obsession about lunch is so strong, just saying, "Oh thinking. Come back to the breath" doesn't really work. You have to plant yourself with both feet, to take a stand and say, "I'm thinking about lunch. That's what's really going on" – a real, clear, full, embodied acknowledgement. This is what's happening. Somehow that can dislodge the glue, or interrupt the gravitational force that keeps us mired in that kind of thinking.

A milder form is simply to use mental noting. So rather than say, "I'm thinking about lunch; this is what thinking about lunch is like," it's simply to use a label like "Thinking; thinking," or "Planning; menu planning [laughs]." Or "Anticipating; anticipating." Sometimes that's enough to dislodge the strong connection.

One of the interesting things around thinking, is that many people are trying to stop thinking, to get rid of thinking, to quiet thinking, to not be so obsessive about their thinking. It's not the thinking that is the problem – it's the force that keeps us connected to thinking. It's the addiction; it's the traction; it's the gravitational pull; it's the way that we're feeding the thinking. It's interesting to focus not so much on the content of your thought, but to really try to explore and feel your way into the intermediary between you and the particular thoughts that you have – what I'm calling the gravitational force, the addiction, the power, the glue. Get a sense of what it's like. How strong is it? Sometimes you can feel the strength of it, the power of it, as it churns away. Sometimes it can actually feel like a force within us that really has no content. It's just a force: sometimes a sense of anxiety, or feeling unsettled, or feeling worried.

Sometimes I've imagined that an anthropologist from Mars comes to visit the Earth. They're really small, these Martians, really, really tiny. They enter into our blood stream. They set themselves up in their field office to do their field study in my thinking brain: inside. What would their field notes be like? They don't have any judgement that this person is thinking. They're just fascinated, "Wow. This is what it's like for a human being to be thinking," and they're taking down field notes. Sometimes I imagine that I'm my own Martian anthropologist [laughs], and I'm taking field notes that help dislodge me from being so identified with the thoughts, believing the thoughts, giving them so much authority. "This is what it's like! This is interesting! It's phenomenal. Five billion years of evolution has come to this [laughs]: a person thinking about lunch. Wow! Amazing. It's amazing that somehow in the Universe, these creatures have these phenomenally complex patterns of thinking."

It's really a miracle that this should operate. It's just as much a miracle if it's a bad thought or a good thought. "Wow, look at how this thing operates!" For the Martian anthropologists, it's all just amazing. I hope that you can learn to be your own anthropologist, to step back and see your thinking for what it is, and not invest so much authority and meaning in it. Thinking is a beautiful and profound thing to do, but it's also very profound and meaningful to have the ability to step away from it, and to not be in its grip.

May you be free of the grip of thinking! Thank you.