

Practice Note: Thinking During Meditation

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsda1 on November 16, 2011

One of the things to consider when you're meditating is how you relate to thinking. What's your attitude, relationship, and involvement with thinking? Sometimes people think they're meditating, but really, they're churning away in their thoughts. Sometimes people can be diligent enough to recognize they're thinking, and then let go of it, and come back. Sometimes people can be in a dual track, multitasking. If they're focusing on the breath in meditation, they can be with their breathing perhaps, but also in the background thoughts are going on. Sometimes which one has the upper hand is not so clear. You might think that you're with your breathing or you're trying to, but the upper hand might be with your thinking. Or you might be able to come back to your breath – letting go of thoughts and coming back – and then you go off into thinking pretty quickly again.

So it's important to recognize what's going on. If it's easy enough for thoughts to recede and be in the background, and you can stay focused on the breath and get concentrated, that's great. But at some point, if thinking in words or in images persists, you want to turn your attention and look at that directly. Just really fully acknowledge it, so that you're not trying to multitask. You're not trying to also stay with your breath. You're not trying to let go of your thinking anymore, but you completely turn towards it, and recognize that you're thinking now. Really see it, and look at it carefully.

If you're thinking with words – verbal thinking – one way of looking at or acknowledging thinking that works for some people is that it's like an inner voice that's talking. You may have a sense that there's a place where the loud speaker is for that voice in your mind. Some people will locate it in the back of their head, or in the middle of the head, or the front of the head – some place that seems to be the location where you're hearing that voice. Then you bring your attention to that location, and hold your attention there very carefully to feel and sense what's happening.

Even if the thinking goes away once you look at it and acknowledge it, don't just quickly go back to your breath. Stay, and take in what the experience is now of not thinking, or what lingers. Sometimes there can be a lot of energy or emotions in thinking. The words might stop, but the energy, emotions, pressure, and tension that might somehow be connected might still be lingering. So, if you can bring your attention to that, just hold it kindly in awareness. Be mindful of that for a while. See what happens. Don't be in a hurry to go to your breathing. If you go quickly to your breath, the thoughts might creep back in again.

If you think more in images, you can do the same thing. Is there some location where the images are projected, like a screen? Sometimes people may have a sense of it in front of them slightly. Sometimes it is in the back of the forehead. Is there some location where the images occur? And then in the same way, you can bring your attention there, and give it a sense of location or place, rather than thinking that is disembodied or unlocated. If you can have a place where the images occur, just keep your attention there. Not to look more carefully, but to help you not be so engaged and caught in it. If the images fade away, there still might be something that lingers there in that place on the 'screen.' There might be energy, emotions, feelings, pressure, or tension there. Just linger. Stay there with your mindfulness, and feel or sense what's happening there.

There is a way of being mindful of thinking, even after thoughts have stopped, that helps you take in the ecology, or the process of thinking – which is more than just the thoughts or images – and help that to relax. If you don't relax the background energy, tension, pressure, and momentum, chances are that the background momentum is going to produce more thoughts as soon as you lower your guard.

After thoughts are gone, it's very interesting to just stay there, recognize fully, and feel or sense what that's like. One interesting thing to notice is that there may be more subtle thoughts operating. The coarser, larger thoughts have stopped, but there may be very subtle thoughts still happening. Then very gently – you may have to be very gentle with your awareness – do the same thing with that. Bring a careful, gentle attention to feel the more subtle thinking going on, and then see if it's possible to gently let go of that as well. And then linger with that, and see what happens. See what's left over from that.

If none of this makes any sense, then you can just focus on your breath. Thank you.