

2013-02-10 Becoming Aware of The Thinking Process

Wed, 9/2 2:58PM • 37:58

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

thinking, thoughts, people, feel, striker, trauma, emotion, planning, notice, mind, imc, connected, attention, important, steady, hold, grip, soften, life, superstitious

SPEAKERS

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So the talk is on thinking, with the idea that sometimes it's useful to look at the building blocks rather than the finished structure. Sometimes if you look at the underlying foundation of something, and you can shift and change the foundation in a way that's applicable in many different areas of our life, or the example that's often given in Buddhism, that if you clip the flowers or the leaves of a plant, it might keeps producing more flowers and more leaves and more shoots. But if you pull it up by the root and get down to the base, then it won't sprout up anymore. So we're thinking. I think the common relationship most people have with thinking is and is to the content of their thoughts. Whether it's auditory kind of words verbal auditory kind of thoughts they have, or whether it's, they think in images. It's more the content, the stories, the ideas. And they can these stories and ideas can have a big impact on us. Because they can affect our mood. We can think certain thoughts and feel kind of get down, feel other thoughts and we feel up. And, and it can be up and down throughout the day. And we can also be influenced by other people, by books by things we see in movies and stuff. The content affects our moods. And so sometimes people wonder, why am I feeling so bad? Why am I so depressed? And it might be maybe it has to do with the kind of thoughts that are being repeated the content of the thoughts over and over again. And sometimes people get these amazing mental loops of thinking certain things and those thoughts then stimulate associated thinking that, that comes out of that feeling depressed and then had depressing thoughts make us more depressed and spiral downwards or angry and spiral out of anger, fear and Spiral Spiral out and anxiety or greed and greedy state and we get caught in the nature of the greedy thoughts. And then we spiral out and the greed wanting more and more can never get enough. But instead of looking at the content of the thoughts, the stories we tell ourselves, if we look at the process of thinking, we can have a whole different relationship to thinking. So the nature of thinking itself. And that can be a quite a foreign idea for some people, that you would look behind the behind the content, or through the content or aside from the content, to look at the very nature of the process of what happens as we're thinking. So an example that I like to use is is you know if I hold the striker and the striker is really important to me this is the most beautiful striker in the world and I'm very proud that IMC has a striker and the status of IMC is really dependent having a really good striker for hitting a bell and so there's a lot at stake in the striker and so I'm really focused on the importance of the striker concerned some of you going to take it and so I could hold it really tight for so long because it just and holding it so tight. I could be so focused on the striker. I don't notice what it's like to be holding it. But if I shift my attention from the striker to the process of holding it to the how I am holding the striker then I noticed that my my my fingers are getting tight and tired and sore and numb and you know, frozen you know a grip my very dear life my things and but if I if I focus not on the striker but What it's like to hold it, then I start feeling I this is not this doesn't feel so good to grip it this way. And so then I begin releasing my grip I loosened up on it. Or if I notice how I'm holding the striker, I

might notice that the How is really fueled, but my fear of losing such a precious striker. It might be fueled by the story I tell about how important it is from the identity of IMC and how important we are in the world. To have a striker that's really, you know, represents us well and caught up in this you know, an attitude, a belief system around what the striker means.

So to step back away from the immediacy of our thoughts, and look at the process of thinking, how we're thinking is a way of is very helpful, and what it means it gives us access to a self understanding that is applicable in many areas of our life and all kinds of different thinking. We can think about all kinds of different things. But if we learn about the process of thinking, then we can learn to be free in the midst of our thinking. All kinds of thinking as opposed to trying to resolve or solve the particular thinking problem we're engaged in. So I think often people are trying to take out the thoughts we're thinking sometimes for a reason. And so we're trying to accomplish that reason, that purpose of the thinking. And so we're caught sometimes in the maze, and labyrinth of thoughts because of that. So to look at thinking in a new different way, a different way, not at the content, not the story, but the process of thinking itself. And so what are some of the things it's possible to notice when you're thinking one of the things that's possible to notice is the intensity with which we're thinking. Sometimes the intensity is very mild, just you know, light, light, easy, kind of just thoughts floating And sometimes it's quite intense the thoughts. And it's one of the things to notice when you're sitting and meditating. Sometimes you can just feel it feels quite nice to have thoughts just kind of drift through like a breeze. And you know, could they come and go, they're easy. They're not really so caught by it. Other times every time you let go of a thought, if you're even successful, letting go, you know, comes back with a vengeance. And you feel this tremendous power and in order to think pressure to think. Or you might notice that you've heard this idea that meditation, it's nice to let go of thoughts. Maybe you're supposed to think let go of thoughts. But you're not going to do that. You're not at all interested in doing that. Why would you want to do that you have this really good thinking going on? Or it's really important to think. And so how are they there's pressure, there's beliefs, there's identification, there's desires connected to our thinking. And how intense are those? How strong are those? Are they still so strong that we're not willing to give up? Or thinking? Are they so strong that we step back from our thinking? Will that go? It comes back immediately with a vengeance, or do we let go, it just floats away and, you know, Easy come, easy go. What's the intensity of our thinking? To understand that our thinking is quite intense, when it is, can also give understanding to how we feel stress. Because a lot of stress that people carry with them is closely connected to how they're thinking, their relationship to their thoughts, how they engage in the thoughts how they caught up in their thoughts very closely. I think that I think the nouns sometimes in my mind, it can feel claustrophobic in there as I ride my thoughts, really The close and every thought is so important and so meaningful and negotiating my world, myself and everything through thoughts and training. And other times, thoughts have a role and a place in my life where they're not claustrophobic at all. I don't feel like I'm bounded by them caught by them. There's lots of space in the mind, breathing room in the mind. And not every thought is not being seen as being significantly consequential. So the question How are you in relationship to your thinking? is an interesting one is Do you believe every thought you have you? Do you are you averse to every thought you have? Are you embarrassed by every thought you have or some of them? Do you have a kind of relationship to that world of thinking? Some people feel oppressed by it some people I've heard people say they wish they can just cut off their head because they're so bothered by what the how their mind is thinking and no thinking mind has a mind of its own and it's not your mind. And you know, please stop all that kind of self deprecating thoughts or angry thoughts or whatever it might be. So there can be aversion and anger and discouragement looking at the mind thinking all the time.

There can be tremendous authority invested in our thoughts, we can invest tremendous hope in what thoughts will do for us. Thoughts are going to solve our life and all the different problems. So if we just

think enough, we just imagine enough just to review enough. If we can just review and redo our past enough times, we'll have a better past. or certainly the planning mind always planning, planning, thinking that planning might make a big difference being just planning it out and I'll be safe, then it'll be everything will be okay. And I've certainly spent a lot of my life planning sometimes, you know, it was kind of a shock to me to discover how much of my time I spent planning and my thoughts. One of the times it was when I was living in the monastery where I spent the year anticipating being assigned to particular job. And so I spent much of that year whenever I had an idle moment, or not planning how I would do that job. And all their deal details and planning it all out and, and the year, the year kid, the time came for the assignment of the monastic jobs. And to my surprise, when they announced the jobs, I was not assigned to the job I was expecting. And then the next thought I had was, what was I doing all year. All the time that I was thinking and planning, but something that didn't turn out to didn't turn out this way I could have been thinking something else. Or not thinking at all. And after all, I wasn't much of that time was spent meditating. So I could have been meditating instead of planning for the job. And I've seen, you know, I've planned all kinds of scenarios for what's going to happen in the future and been anxious around some plans, some of the projections of the future. And one of the things that helped me was my really poor track record, and planning successfully and projecting the future successfully. And more often than not, whatever I thought was going to happen didn't happen the way that I thought. And so I'm just like, I learned slowly, but after 10,000 hundred thousand times where, you know, I didn't plan out accurate they didn't project into the future accurately. I began to doubt the authority on my planning thoughts, my planning mind, I be on sale, maybe Maybe not, who knows, but I didn't hold it. So I was invest so much in that. So we can look at how we think by how our relationship is to thinking how we hold thinking. And there are some questions you can ask yourself in this regard. You can ask questions like, Is it true? what you're thinking? You can ask, Is it useful? what you're thinking, you can ask? is the best use of your time to be thinking what you're thinking now, there are times in my life, I notice what I'm thinking and it's innocent enough what I'm thinking, but it doesn't seem to be very useful to think about it. Or maybe there are more useful things to think about. And so then I'll switch gears. And I think when I was younger before I practiced meditation, It never occurred to me that I could change what I'm thinking. I just, you know, went along with the ride. And whatever the ride was, you know, we're not there was unquestionable that it just never occurred to me just thoughts just were the nature of reality. I was thinking but now I see my thoughts and I say, Oh, I think can be useful to think about something else and pick up a particular theme Dharma themes are great. So to think about particular Dharma topic that I want to invest explore in my life or living my life or think about contemplate, be informed by. And I find that when i times when I think particular useful Dharma topics, values I want to live by, I tend to live by those values. So I tend to more likely to respond in a better way to the world around me. Then if I just let my mind get free rein to think whatever it wants.

So one things to notice around thinking is the physical quality of thinking, the physical sensations that come along with thinking. Now, if you're thinking kind of very likely, and loosely, there might not feel much, but I think most of you probably have experienced some time when you're really intensely involved and thinking something maybe a problem you have to really use important to solve. And your eyes get tense, your forehead kind of froze up. Maybe your shoulders get tense parts of your body muscles kind of get typed up, because they're kind of the intensity of thinking is translated into certain kind of holding pattern contraction their muscles. And, you know, some people get headaches from, you know, how they're kind of the pressure, the tension connected to thinking. So rather than looking at the content of your thoughts and trying to solve life there, what happens if you look at the pressure or the tension Where do you feel it? Or how do you how do you feel it I feel it often in my in my area where I guess behind the skull lay inside the skull, I feel it is pressure tension, sometimes I feel it's a lot of energy swirling around in there. Other people can feel it more in their eyes, some people in their neck and shoulders. There's some people on the front of their of their head or their heads. Some people are

common that people feel something in the back pressure there something so then identifying having identified some physical sensation and connected to thinking to then steady, relaxed way, hold your attention on that part of the body. And just kind of that's part of the value of having some stability and mindfulness is be able to keep the attention there. And then there's something to be looked at something interesting to notice. There's a difference between different feeling inside between holding the attention Steady than having the attention being hijacked by our thoughts. Many times when we're involved in our thinking and caught up in our thoughts, it's very easy to live kind of a superficial life, the mind and have a superficial part of the brain or the mind is kind of operating. It's partly why there's a lot of agitation in the mind with there's a lot of minds jumping around thinking about all kinds of things. But if you want to kind of have access to the deeper qualities of the mind, or the heart, it really helps to hold the mind steady, so not jumping around a lot. So simply turn around and find where the sensations of thinking are in the body, then hold yourself steady there can begin this process of deepening opening up one of the one of the reactions people can have to feeling discomfort around thinking feeling pressure or tightness or a headache or something is a feeling that this needs to go away right away. This needs to be fixed. This needs to I need to do something I can't stay here. Part of the wisdom of practice is to be very patient and just hold a steady attention there as if it's going to be there forever as if it's okay for it to be there and not be not get pulled off into trying to fix it, trying to judge it, trying to make meaning out of it, try to just hold steady and quiet as if it's okay to be that way. And what will probably happen is that if you do that for a few minutes, five minutes, sometimes it can be longer sometimes, but not that long, that something begins to change. It's very hard for anything to stay the way it is, if you're holding it under the gaze of attention. So if I was holding the striker really, really tight, but if I turned my attention to hold a steady, steady gaze on the grip of the striker, chances are I can't hold the grip for much longer, things will begin to soften and relax. So to turn and just gently come reluctantly hold the tension in the gaze of awareness, not succumbing to the usual reactive ideas or reactions we have to feeling discomfort if it's uncomfortable, just kind of beings calm, just steady being with this. Couple of days ago, I heard a talk by a man who does what's called critical incident stress reduction, stress management, which is a field of psychology that works with communities of people when there's been some crisis looks, suicide and murder. They go into places of work when colleague has died or schools and he talked about working he gave an example of working with a second grade class where a second grader in the class had died suddenly. So he went back to talk to 13 kids in small class about you know, try help them support them and like to say a lot about it. But one of the things he talked about this process of critical systems, stress management, was to start with thinking, and then go into feeling. And then at the end, go back up into thinking.

So to start with what we are recognizing what people are thinking, what their thoughts are, but then to look deeper into them. And he used the word heart, head to heart to head again. So one of the things to notice in thinking, especially if thinking is the same thing over and over again, is to look at the emotions that are connected to their thinking, or their feelings and feelings, emotions, attitudes, moods, that are connected to the thinking. And often there are, there are, especially if thinking is strong, strong. Some of them might be welcoming emotions, and some of them might be not so welcoming. That doesn't that's so comfortable. So as I like to say is that often like the planning mind more often than not, people spend a lot of time planning. There's often fear or apprehension connected to that. If there is, sometimes desire, strong desire thoughts, wanting, wanting, wanting, something might be connected to a loneliness or sense of emptiness that people might have.

So any any emotion at all can be the source of fuel for what we're thinking about. So rather than focusing on the content, drop down into the body, and feel the emotion. And there also it can be hard to hold a steady gaze, be hard to just stay there calmly in a relaxed, calm way. And just to hold in the attention, how we're feeling, because of the very strong tendency many people have to want to fix

things to want to judge things to one To interpret things to make stories about things, and we make stories about how we feel, and they're back in the content again, and we make stories. And that's how partly we get into these loops. So to drop into the body and feel, how are we feeling, what's the emotion that's connected to it is a very, very useful thing to do with it with thinking. And to do those two things to drop into the body and feel the physical aspect of thinking, the pressure, the tension, to drop into the body and feel the emotion that's connected to thinking is, is dropping into the process rather than the content. And so that way, if you learn to that scale to do that, then you can do that for any kind of content at all. And drop down and, and, and work on those two levels. Part of the advantage of working on those two levels, the physical and emotional is that that's a, that's a, often an easier place to begin softening the grip. of our holding, how we get preoccupied when we're thinking about, if we're trying to loosen the grip of thoughts by thinking our way out of it, it doesn't work so well. But if we can, can drop into these more physical and emotional aspects and hold them there, things begin to open unravel to dissolve to soften more often I think they're not. And so if you learn learn that skill, some it's a skill that's learned doesn't it's not automatic doesn't happen quickly, with the skill of by repeatedly doing it dropping down to that, that noticing that to, to learn how to recognize those parts of the thinking process. Then no matter where you are, and what kind of thoughts you have, you don't have to focus on the content. You can focus on the process in order to loosen up the attachment that clinging the stuckness we have but not so that you can only go around as a thoughtless person You know, you know, so give us some ideas, you know, you're less thoughts you have, the more spiritual you are, you know, not supposed to think at all. But rather be able to think, freely and wisely to have more choice in how we think. And what do we think about to be able to think in more creative ways more intelligent ways in order to, because our thinking is not very intelligent if we're locked into our thoughts. But if we step back and have a looser, lighter attitude towards it, and are connected to ourselves in a deeper way through our body and our emotion, then there's often much more creativity, more intelligence, available in the thinking process that we do. So one more thing I want to say about thinking That maybe can give you a handle on this what I'm talking about feeling it in your body. Because I've asked people, sometimes some people, how do you feel your thoughts in your body? When you're thinking you're thinking your body, and they just look at me like I'm from Mars never occurred to them and they kind of they try and they can't find anything. And then I'll say that sometimes I'll say well is in your little toe. They said, No, it's in your earlobe, no. And then and then but kind of starting on the peripheries like that. Then usually after a while, we'll actually you know, it's more generally in the hair in my head. And I said, he said, your eyebrows? No, no, it's kind of like deeper in there. And so the beginning kind of takes a while sometimes to kind of narrow it down to because it's such a foreign idea to some people to identify a location but here's a little exercise and Some people find helpful for look locating the sensations of the physicality or the emotionality of their thinking. If you if you think, in words convey auditory kind of thinking, where's the location of the speaker? That's projecting the sounds.

So, you know, like right back here at IMC the speakers above me, right? So, that kind of speaker where where's the location? Where's this? Where's a place the sound are the words are coming from. And it person thinks in images, where are those images being projected? And sometimes, it seems like there's a stronger correlation between the verbal thinkers to feel it more in the back of their skull and for Visual thinkers to see at nor in the front. I don't know if that's universal or how but that's what I've kind of noticed. But once you kind of locate kind of a general place where this is happening then it's possible sometimes to notice then around that are embedded in that is there any tension pressure energy as part of it? Where's the physical energy in your body? That comes with thinking what kind of energy is connected to your thinking? A good a good interesting place to see this is to sit quietly sometime meditation or any place they feel quiet relaxed, everything is fine settled. And then out of the blue your mind thinks about where disaster your high school prom was. Or something like that, you know? And, and so then, you know, suddenly you know, she did he did. And you to energy, maybe right? And

suddenly you feel like you're sitting up straighter and like this energy is shoots up into the head. And they say, wow, there's a lot of energy around this topic. But with the feel where the energy in your body is very, very interesting, anything you can do to start using your body as a reference point for your mindfulness practice is very helpful, especially for this thing about thinking. So with that as a, as an offering to you something hopefully with idea of something you can use in your life to look at more carefully. I'd encourage you not to give too much authority to what you think. And certainly don't invest it with authority. Thinking is an important part of our life. But generally, it's overrated.

So we have about 10 minutes. I'd like to hear what you think about this talk or questions you might have. Wait for the mic.

I really like what you said I really resonated with it because I'm one of those thinkers. And I have tried to get in touch with my body and that definitely helps increase your viewpoint on intentional thinking. When you try to target something you want to happen. You're putting your intentions forward towards that.

You mean if you if you want something so you, you think about what you want. Imagine what you want and 10 what you want. I think intention is good. I think having an intention for something. And being clear on that intention setting that intention can be very helpful. But I think it has to be somewhat realistic and not too superstitious. I mean, I, you know, I intend to win the California Lottery. You know, I think that's a little bit superstitious, but I intend to be generous. I think to actually be very clear on intention like I intend to be mindful, I intend to. I tend to go to work today and, and have kind conversations. conversations are helpful for my colleagues, to really be clear and stand behind that intention, you might not remember, but you're more likely to remember that clear and more direct or full fully we embody a fully we state or the intention,

an intention for good health. Have you seen that play out? I've been told, I've been told that we can help people.

What does it mean to intend good health? I intend good health for all of you. Does that help?

If somebody is facing some challenges rather than go down the negative that they just try and keep the positive thoughts about their health or their well being?

I suppose it could be helpful. I think that What we think has a big impact on our mood or emotions and our physiology? And so we have to, you know, be a little bit careful what we think. So certainly a big part of cord mindfulness practices, is teaching us how to track our thoughts, know what's going on know the impact, and then have the ability to let go of those thoughts that are not useful to recognize what's not useful to recognize the cost or the effect, but even useful thoughts. This is this is why this talk today, to look at the process of thinking different from the content is important, because it's sometimes the content the content is angelic. Sometimes the content can be like most wonderful thing in the world, of course, should be no problem with this kind of thinking. But you personally might be gripping those thoughts for dear life, you know, there might be so much tension around having those thoughts. So to soften and relax, so this practice teaches us to relax and to soften the grip of the mind and if the grip of the mind is not there, Then it's possible to have even have negative thoughts, and they don't have any impact on us. They have impact these thoughts have impact on us mostly because of how we relate to them and how strong were connected and invested in them. So the practice is to let go, and then and then to focus on something that's more useful and uplifting. I think it's a nice thing to do, within within, within reason. Sometimes it does come along with superstitious thinking. Sometimes it

comes along with ideas that were responsible for our health. And if only I think certain thoughts, then my cancer will go away. So you know, it's all up to my thinking, and I think can be overdone that kind of emphasis on the role of thinking, but certainly, we can have stress. We know what we think, as I said, as I said earlier, has a big impact on our stress levels. And if we can think in ways not stressful, think of ways that bring us joy and well being I think it's our For you. Part of the danger of positive thinking is that some people are too quick to do it. And they do it as they do it as an overlay on top of their, what's going on? And so there's all this negativity and all this difficulties going on underneath churning away. And they kind of ignoring it because they're kind of forcing themselves to have positive thoughts and think, think think, think, think think with thoughts, game think thoughts. And again, it can be a lot of people over they do this positive thinking things, it can end up being a lot of surface thoughts that are done very furiously and desperately and, and the depth of what's really going on for them is untouched. So, you know, I think it's better and better. But I think one of the useful ways to go about this is to do this process, mindless process of dipping down into the body dipping down to the emotions, and really seeing what's there and really kind of trying to resolve What's there in some deeper way. And then from that deeper place to have more positive thoughts, I think is much more effective than only then going around. positive, positive, positive, positive. You know, just got to think faster. Okay, I saw I saw someone in front of you.

I was wondering how

can you guys hear me now? I was wondering how you work with the mindfulness practice with like people have suffered some kind of trauma. So going into the body and feeling where the emotion behind the thought is, is a difficult thing. Yes. So I was curious how you work with people who have gone through some type of trauma and sitting in the body and doing that kind of deeper loci

like what techniques Do

ya mean? That's such a huge topic, I can't really do it justice in a few minutes. And when it's sometimes when it's people are very strong trauma, it might I might suggest they go work with a trauma therapist. And the trauma therapy is very different kinds, but they have all kinds of skills, techniques, that they train people into how to work with trauma in ways that sometimes are comparable to what we do are similar to what we do in mindfulness, but are more focused for that purpose. So sometimes it's better, you know, better than better for me not to offer much because it's better to get professional help. Sometimes, one of the things I like to convey to people, anybody including someone who has trauma issues, is that we're supposed to become our own teachers, which means we're supposed to monitor ourselves and take the feedback that comes back to help us know how to go forward what to do next. So if we pay attention to something when our signs say there's anxiety and we bring our attention to the body Anxiety and the consequences of that we feel more scared in a way that seems to retrigger the trauma or open up wounds in a way that are too difficult to be with. Having learned that, then we learned you know, this is not useful. And rather than then trying, again again to go in there and do this kind of instruction, then we learn from it, this is not useful, I think I need some other help, I need a different approach. And so then there might be a different approach to be taken. There are different approaches for mindfulness. In very simple simply, sometimes when emotions are very difficult or feelings are very difficult. Sometimes it's it's helpful not to get too close to the motion. And so some people actually imagine themselves standing hundred yards away. Imagine they're far far away or bird up in the sky, looking down at them and they can feel the fear or the hurt or something, but they feel at such a distance because, you know, sometimes we find that teachers will say, bring your attention right into the middle of what you're feeling but for Some of the trauma that you should go, don't go in the middle, be 100 yards away. And then it's safe to kind of feel it. And then you can be with a new useful

way. Sometimes it's been very brief times with something, maybe it's useful to feel the pain, but to do it just for a couple of seconds, and then and then pay attention, something completely different, gets stabilized again, and then open to it and to develop some, one of the things that's very important for trauma, people with trauma is to develop the confidence and their ability to pull themselves out of it. The strong spiraling feelings that can come up, panic attacks hurt all kinds of things. And so to do it in very, very small steps, go open up to that part maybe of your life for a moment or is filament and then clearly pull out, go for a walk, do whatever you need to do. And then they only have confidence in those little steps you can do and then with that confidence, you can take a step closer, but the sense of confidence is very important to give that you have some control over How far you go in and how far you can, how quickly you can come out. So those are just a few little checklist kind of things. It's important issue for many people. Okay, so there's a tea today. Besides are nice. And so the community and getting to know being around other people in a way that practice and been around the practice is often a very useful thing. And those of you who are new, particularly what I welcome you to our center, and perhaps as we'd stop now, and those of you who stay for the tea, maybe encourage people to stay. Maybe you can turn to someone near you and say hello, especially if you've been here a while and you notice someone near you, you don't know who might be new say hello and introduce yourself. Thank you.