

Thinking (1 of 5) Studying Tension

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This is the beginning of a five-day series on mindfulness of thinking. We will follow the same pattern we followed over the last weeks, of relaxation, recognition, respect, restoration, and release.

There is sometimes a tendency in meditation circles to be frustrated around our thinking, or, even worse, to think that thinking is our enemy – that it's a problem to think, and if only we didn't think, we could meditate.

In mindfulness meditation, we are learning the art of bringing a clear awareness to all aspects of our life – our inner life, outer life, personal life, and social life. In meditation, all the different parts of our psychophysical system become clear in the present moment. One of the things that will stand out sooner or later (for some of us sooner rather than later) is how much thinking there is.

Some days a lot is going on in life, and we have a lot of concerns. The mind can be going fast and spinning out. Sometimes it seems as if the mind has a mind of its own. We are churning out more and more thoughts, and there is no way to stop it.

Rather than making thinking an enemy, what we can do in mindfulness meditation is to turn our attention towards being mindful of thinking. But the art of that is to make sure that mindfulness is not thoughtfulness. It is not thinking about thinking. Some people will confuse mindfulness with thinking, so they are thinking about what is happening in the present moment. I'll talk a little bit more about that tomorrow.

It is not about having discursive thoughts, commentary, or interpretations. It's not as if you're having a conversation with yourself about how you're thinking and what you're thinking about. There is an almost silent awareness that we use in mindfulness. As an analogy, this is like the kind of silence that happens when you have a dirty windshield in a car, and you clean the windshield. The windshield is clean now, and it is still silent. It doesn't speak or say anything. But you see through it: you see through that silence. You see through that clarity, to see clearly what is on the other side.

The mind's ability to see or sense quietly is the movement we're going for. You're listening to your thoughts. You're listening with a quiet mind, even though your thinking mind is busy. Or, you're feeling – some people find it very helpful to feel the thinking. In terms of relaxation, the physical sensations that we can feel connected to thinking can really be key.

Sometimes it is difficult to see the physical connection between thinking and the muscles. Other times you can feel it. There are times when I'm particularly sensitive and quiet, when it feels as if the mind is a puppeteer, and I'm a puppet. All these strings coming down from the thinking mind are connected to all kinds of little muscles in my body. All the micro muscles are being pulled, tightened, or released, as I think about different things. Some thoughts are powerful, such as resentments that I had at some point, and I can feel my stomach pull up, or my shoulders go up.

When I think about a wonderful conversation I had with a friend recently, something releases. The puppeteer has relaxed the muscles. Even if I was tense or holding on, while thinking about this nice conversation, something says, "Ah, that's good," and I relax. The more relaxed we become, the more we can feel the micro muscle strings tugging on all the muscles.

If you are tense or preoccupied with your thoughts so that you don't notice your body, you won't have a clue what I'm talking about. Chronic tension, where there's no relaxation at all, can become normal for people. They think this is just how it is, as if this is the natural way to be. In chronic tension, there's no movement for anything to relax.

As people meditate, most people find that slowly the body relaxes. Some of the surface tension that we carry

with us begins to soften and relax. It is the same way with the mind. Maybe thinking doesn't stop, but it calms down and gets slower.

I want to emphasize again that we are not making thinking the problem, but rather, when thinking is strong and captivating, we calmly turn our attention to be mindful of thinking itself. This whole week will be spent talking about how we can be mindful of thinking in different ways.

What I want to emphasize today is for us to be mindful of the tensions there, the energetics of thinking – the distress, the forcefulness, the pressure, the contraction, the tightness, the insistence, the hesitation, the closed-downness, the shutting down, the dullness, and the numbness. All these things can be associated with thinking. They need our care.

If we are distracted by the content of our thoughts, and we think the content is what's most important, we might miss the underlying tension that is actually much closer to who we really are. That tension is like a deeper layer. The doorway into the depth of who we are is not through thinking, remembering, figuring things out in our mind, and reinterpreting the past.

The way to have a doorway into the heart – into the deep inner life – is through the ability to relax. When there is thinking, and we're pulled into the world of thoughts, one thing that can be helpful to learn to do (and it takes time) is to relax our interest in thoughts – to break the enchantment with the content of the thoughts.

Some of us have had similar thoughts over and over again for years. The amount of repetition that goes on in many people's minds is kind of astounding. If people could hear how often any of us think the same thing, they would wonder about our sanity. It's normal enough to be repetitive, but it's also not necessary. What is interesting for a meditator is to recognize that part of the reason there is a lot of repetition, and the reason why one's self is often a central character, centrally involved in their thoughts, is that there is an intense interest in that content – an interest in self: me, myself and mine. That interest and that investment can be felt distinct from the content of what we're thinking about.

Sometimes I've had the feeling in my mind that I'm glued to my thinking. I could feel the glue, or I could feel the bungee cord pulling me into it close by. It doesn't matter what I'm thinking about; I can feel the glue or the bungee cord. Then, to feel that tension. Sometimes you can relax it. But sometimes we can't relax the physical or mental tension. We can't relax it as something we *will*, or as something we *do*.

But here's a real key to finding your way with long-term mindfulness meditation: it helps if you have the willingness to allow yourself to be tense – allow yourself to feel the stress, the contraction, the pressure, as if it has permission to be there. It's okay. But hold it in awareness.

I love the image in which awareness is like two cupped hands that gently come along and hold the tension and the stress kindly, supportively. Learn the patience to be able to do that forever. Because some of the tensions that we carry within us are not amenable to being directed or told to relax, or that we are in charge. The idea that we are in charge, and we're going to do something to this whole wonderful system, is sometimes just one more insult.

But if we can come with respect, care, and kindness, and say: "Okay, here I am. I'll be with you for however long it takes," then, amazingly, things begin to shift under that kind of attention. Something unexpectedly begins to relax, and something unexpectedly softens. Our job is to bring attention that is soft; attention that is kind and caring; attention that is slow; attention that is not in a hurry or insistent; attention that is not forcing the issue; attention that is not tense.

So, relax. Learn about your attention. Become a student of your tension. Maybe before you can relax you have to really recognize and get to know the tension. Chances are that for most of us, there is more tension throughout the day than is necessary. So we study the unnecessary tension and stress in the body and the mind.

Over the next 24 hours, in preparation for the teachings tomorrow, you might think of yourself more as a student of tension than as a student of relaxation. Get to know tension well. If you feel that you have recognized it and taken time to know it, then if it is easy to relax, please do. Maybe this can be a fun day of studying and hanging out with tension and relaxation. See what happens when that's the theme of the day for you.

In some ways, in this series that started with breath, body, and emotions last week, and today thinking, everything that preceded is building towards our capacity to really work with thoughts.

Mindfulness of thinking is not meant for people who are beginners, but for those who have a foundation in the earlier types of mindfulness. What I'm going to talk about this week builds on what precedes it. Relaxation supports what I'm going to talk about tomorrow, and so forth.

I say all this to give the idea that I'm not expecting you to be able to do all this suddenly if you're a brand new beginner, but it builds on the skills and the understandings that have been growing through ongoing meditation practice. Hopefully, that's the case, and this is supportive. I look forward to tomorrow. Thank you.