

Thinking (2 of 5) Freedom in Recognition

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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We've come to the second talk on mindfulness of thinking, where the emphasis is on the power of recognition. The art of mindfulness of thinking is not to think more, but to be able to recognize more clearly what's happening as we think. As we are thinking, there is a lot to notice.

Before we talk about what we can notice in thinking, we need to know how we know, how we notice – the way in which recognition happens, which is one of the central features of the art of mindfulness meditation. Recognition is the way in which we know what is happening as it's happening. This is not knowing in complicated ways, as in what the story is and why it's here. It is just the simplest knowledge and recognition of what's happening.

So if I'm breathing, I recognize that just breathing is happening, without connecting it to other breathing. Just breathing is happening. If there's a sound, it is just a sound, and just hearing is happening. As we settle in meditation, the idea is to be as simple as possible. We are not caught in, reactive to, or judging what's happening. There is just a recognition.

This is not an easy skill to learn, but it's a powerful one because it helps us to be free in the midst of whatever is happening. We can stand in the middle of a complicated life, and are able to just take it in and recognize what's happening, but are not swayed by it or reactive to it. We just see it clearly. Then we have access to our wisdom inside, and clarity about what to do, in a way that we don't when we are caught up and enmeshed in the drama of it all.

We learn the ability to know how we recognize, with radical simplicity. Meditation is a wonderful laboratory to discover how simple recognizing can be. In that simplicity, we can find some peace and freedom from whatever it is we're recognizing.

It could be that we're tremendously depressed, and it is difficult to be that way. It's very sticky to be depressed. But as mindfulness gets stronger, it becomes possible to recognize, "Oh, this is depression." Somehow for that moment, just a moment of recognizing this is depression, a little light bulb goes off. It gets a little bit clearer – the fog clears, just for that little moment.

Sometimes you have to make the note a few times, until you are really standing in the note – not standing in the depression: "depression, depression," "anger, anger" – whatever it might be. Slowly, a crack opens up, and we begin identifying more with the recognition than with whatever emotional state we might be in. "Oh, there is sadness, sadness." The sadness is not diminished or disrespected, but it is clearly known, so we are not influenced by it or caught in it. This is an amazing capacity.

As we do this, we also start seeing more clearly what is happening as we're thinking. That seeing also gives us some freedom. One thing that is useful in meditation is to distinguish different kinds of thinking, so there is more clarity about what we're recognizing, and we can recognize what kind of thinking is useful for meditation and what is not.

For example, there can be dream-like fantasies that have nothing to do with the present moment. Maybe there are images involved, and we are caught up in the fantasy world of the future, of what is going to happen tomorrow. Through the imagination, we have entered into the realm of tomorrow, of fantasy. That kind of thinking is just recognized as "fantasy." We recognize that it is really a disconnection from reality, and we are not really present for what is immediately here for us.

Another kind of thinking is discursive thought. This is when the mind is having a conversation. Either we're talking to ourselves, or we're having a conversation with someone else. Or we are repeating a conversation from yesterday to try to come up with a better response, and reviewing it over and over. Discursive thought is

like having a discussion in the mind. This is also not about the directness of mindfulness. It is removed – it's a kind of abstraction. With direct seeing, we recognize, "Oh – discursive thinking is happening, discursive thinking."

Then there's a simpler kind of thinking, which is getting closer to thinking that recognizes what's happening. This can still be a sentence, such as, "I've sat down to meditate." It's true – we have sat down to meditate. This kind of thinking is recognizing what's happening. We think, "I'm feeling hungry. I'm wondering what I should have for lunch." As we begin thinking about what to have for lunch, then it becomes a discursive thought or a fantasy. But the simple thought, "I am hungry and I am thinking about lunch" is a recognition of what is happening here and now.

In meditation, there might also be very simple thoughts in the mind that are directing the meditation. For example: "I am thinking about lunch because I am hungry. Maybe I'll bring my attention to my stomach where I'm hungry, and just feel that." That is a very simple thought telling you, "Let's go pay attention there." Or, "Let's go back to the breathing. It was nice to be with the breathing. I don't have to think about lunch. Let's go back to the breathing and feel the breath."

With that kind of thinking, it might not be necessary to have clear recognition. It is just guiding you, pointing you to the present moment. You might have the thought, "I think I should practice recognition now." You can have an infinite regress if you think, "Well, let me recognize that I'm thinking about recognizing I'm thinking." That is very quickly crazy-making. Recognition can be really simple. Some very simple instructional kinds of thinking can be very supportive in meditation, provided the instruction is relaxed, easeful, and not demanding or stern.

We can have even simpler thoughts, which are closely related to mental notes. These are just one word. Rather than, "I'm hungry – what's for lunch?", we think, "hunger," or maybe, "tightness," "a pang in the belly," or, "hearing." Or maybe, "warmth." Not: "I'm sitting in a warm room," but just feeling a "warmth," because with your eyes closed, sitting in a warm room is kind of an abstraction. But with the eyes closed, the direct experience is just "warmth," or "coolness, coolness."

As meditation gets quieter and quieter, the more it becomes relevant to keep it that simple: warmth, coolness, hearing, in-breath, out-breath, pressure, release of pressure, expansion, contraction. It's not a job, not work that you're supposed to do. Mental noting is supposed to be getting closer and closer to where the mind is very clear – clearly aware of what's happening in the present moment as it is happening.

Thinking, which is so easy to get pulled into or caught by, is where mental noting is sometimes very effective. Mental noting is a way of stepping out of the mud and the quagmire. When you are stuck in the mud and you can't get out – it's like quicksand – to be able to pull yourself out, it is helpful to have one foot on dry land.

The classic example is when two people are in quicksand, one person tries to pull the other one out, and the one pulling sinks deeper. Then the other tries to pull out the one who is sinking, but they progressively dig themselves in deeper. But if one of them is up on dry land, that person can pull the other one out.

With thinking, simple recognition is meant to be like standing on dry ground, or being on a train looking out the window, not involved with what you see, but clearly recognizing it. We clearly recognize "thinking, thinking," or "remembering, remembering."

One of the nice things about mental notes is that we can pay attention to the tone of voice that's making the note. If it is harsh, afraid, or irritated, we can feel that in the tone. The idea is for the tone to be very relaxed and easy, untroubled by what we're noticing. This is where we start feeling the freedom of recognition.

That freedom may not be easy to discover, but once we get the hang of how a simple moment of recognition is a kind of freedom, a kind of peace, that kind of cracks the universe open, and we start feeling much more space, more peace, and also a kind of delight.

I find delight in recognition sometimes. I'm thinking about...I need to get my oil changed in my car – "Thinking. Oh, that's what I'm thinking about." It is as if I'm no longer in the thought, and I am delighted or amazed that, "Wow, this mind thinks." It's quite something. It is easier to be amazed, delighted, or free if we step back on dry land and just recognize "thinking, thinking."

It is possible to get busy with all this recognition. Hopefully, you will recognize that: "Now I'm getting busy. I'm working too hard at it. I'm doing too much of it." The idea is to do just enough to support you.

Some people will not do the active recognition, the noting, when they're resting with the breath and being with the breath, in and out. But they definitely use it when they find themselves caught in thinking because, with some practice, this becomes a really clear, easy way to step away from the thoughts and not be enmeshed in them. We turn the light of attention onto the fact that we're thinking: "thinking, thinking."

Over time, as mindfulness gets stronger, an interesting skill to learn while thinking about things is to allow ourselves to think, because we need to think about them, but also to be aware of what it's like to be thinking. Then we can adjust the "how," so the thinking is not as fast, as forceful, as addicted, or as harsh, whatever it might be, and find a supportive, pleasant, enjoyable way to think.

Thinking can be a wonderful thing, and meditation is not supposed to be a critique of thinking, like you're not supposed to think at all costs, or thinking is bad. Instead, we are trying to restore thinking to a way that is harmonious, peaceful, and supportive for our lives. In meditation, the path to that is to step away from thinking.

Meditation is the one place where we barely need to think at all. Certainly, we don't need discursive thoughts. We don't need to think about things that are not present. The only thing to think about is what is present here and now, but without analysis or asking why. We keep it very simple – just simple thoughts about it, such as: "Let me see if I can hold that in awareness. Let me meet that with kindness. Can I feel that in my body?" And then as we settle in, "Oh, pressure, warmth, tightness" – simpler and simpler.

I hope that this makes some sense. If what I'm saying seems not quite right for you or not understandable at this point, just kind of file it away. I think there will come a time when you'll recognize that it is valuable to do what I've been talking about today. Thank you.