

Thinking (3 of 5) Respecting Thoughts

November 3, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

content, emotion, mindfulness, motivation

Gil Fronsdal

Here we are at the third talk on mindfulness of thinking. The focus today is on respecting thinking. I like to think that in Dharma practice we're learning to respect everything.

I remember the surprise I felt once when I was sitting in the meditation hall for a retreat next to a Japanese Zen monk. At the end of the retreat, people came into the meditation hall to retrieve a little cup that he'd used during the retreat to drink tea. Before he handed them the teacup, he bowed deeply to the cup. I wondered why would he bow to a cup. That opened my eyes to a whole different way of living – living with respect for all things, but doing so wisely.

Thinking does not need to be an enemy, and we can respect it deeply. Sometimes I think that what we usually think of as thinking – the thoughts, the words, the inner voice, or the images if we think more in images that pass through our mind – is kind of the tip of the iceberg. I think we are mostly involved with the tip of the iceberg, but there is much more to thinking.

Here is a metaphor that is not so icy cold. Maybe our relationship with thinking is like going to a city park or nature preserve, and there's a little lawn at the entrance where we spend all our time. The lawn is just a small part of what the park is all about. Maybe someday we go into the park and discover there is so much more to it.

The surface of thinking is the content of the thought. We are not necessarily respecting the content of the thought. I think some of the content of thinking is a little nonsensical, sometimes worse. Some content is very unfortunate. But there is no need to berate oneself or feel bad about oneself for what the content is unless we act on it. Then, if it's nonsense, or it's actually harmful, it is very unfortunate.

The way we learn to respect thinking is to not be so involved in the content – not be glued to it, and not invest so much importance in the content, especially for the purposes of meditation. Rather, we bring mindfulness to the holistic experience of thinking – the art of learning all the component parts of thinking. This is a part of mindfulness in general – to see things and think in terms of components. We see that things come together from causes and conditions, and that different things exist together in relationship to each other. When we start seeing that, we stop reifying or getting too focused or fixated on one particular part of the whole.

One of the most important areas of thinking is emotion. When there is obsessive thinking, and we are really caught in the grip of strong thinking, chances are high that there's an emotion that is fueling it, or out of which it's coming. More often than not, planning arises out of some kind of apprehension or anxiety.

Remembering can come from a variety of things. It can come from happiness and delight. It can also come from a desire to relive something, maybe because we're lonely, and we want to remember. Remembering can come from anger and resentment, where you review the offense over and over again as a way of somehow making the past better. You know that making the past better is kind of a hopeless cause. The past won't change much, but we can shift how we think about it. We can shift how we relate to it.

If we are caught in the grip of resentment, and that's what is fueling the thinking, then we want to bring respectful attention to that resentment, or the anxiety, or the loneliness, whatever might be fueling it. We might feel the discomfort that is producing the tension of thinking.

Respecting each thing means giving it a second look, feeling it, and being present for it. I sometimes think of the content of thought as like a messenger or a signpost. The sign is pointing in a direction. What's written on the sign is not that important. What's important is the direction the sign is pointing.

Thinking is pointing back to the emotions out of which it arises. As we feel the emotions and get to know them, and practice mindfulness of the emotions, this might be a good time to respect them deeply. It might be a good

time to feel the physical manifestation of the emotion. This is the place where we start noticing the tension in the body that is related to thinking. Usually, the more tension there is in the body, the more obsessive the thinking will become. There's a way in which tension in the body creates a kind of mental tension that presses out thinking, or makes thinking more desperate, more important, or more insistent.

There is a reciprocal relationship between how much we're invested in the content of the thought and the tension in the body, and also between how much tension we have in the body, and how much we are caught up in our thoughts. It is a chicken and egg thing. It's hard to know which one comes first.

But as we get quieter and quieter in meditation, sometimes we can see some of that. We can see tension arising in the body, and lo and behold, certain kinds of thoughts arise. Or we feel certain thoughts arise, and we notice the tension that follows in the body.

Opening up to be more holistic has several wonderful functions. One is that we learn where to place our mindful attention so it is onward leading, productive, and helps us become free. Sometimes putting attention on the content of the thought just encourages us to think more and more. But putting the attention on the emotion underlying it begins to allow the emotions to settle, or to open up, or to be processed.

This also means we're not feeding our thinking with our interest and our involvement with them. Thinking will generally start to dissipate if we are not directly interested in thoughts and involved in them – if we just let them go.

There is a wonderful idea (some of you know this better than me – I never remember the number) that emotions never last more than something like 90 seconds, unless we're feeding them and fueling them. The researchers have found they are relatively, surprisingly short. I know sometimes if I bring my attention to an emotion and am present for it, it seems to relax pretty quickly. But thinking disappears even faster. If we are no longer fueling the thoughts, they last a millisecond. It's very short. So the perpetuation of thinking has a lot to do with how we feed it by being involved and engaged in it.

The idea of respecting thoughts is about opening up more widely and feeling the wider ecology of thinking – the emotional, the energetic, the physical, and the motivational. Sometimes it really helps to notice what motivation is behind the thoughts. If we are planning a lot, maybe the motivation is to make ourselves safe when we show up at some event. We recognize: "Oh, that's the motivation. Feel that. Maybe that needs our attention." The thought is like a signpost pointing back. Then we realize, "Oh, I'm anxious. Let me feel my anxiety. Let me practice with that, and breathe with that."

As we practice mindfulness and respect, they begin to open up the space in the mind, or the space in the heart, so there is more space, more room to hold all things. The space can hold our emotions and our thoughts without being glued to them or trapped in them.

This is a wonderful idea: to make space rather than get rid of things. Rather than fixing something, we make more and more room and space. Many things don't have to be a problem when there is lots of space for them. When we're claustrophobic, it's as if we're troubled by things and pushed around by them.

Respecting things is valuable not only because that helps what we are attending to. It's also a means of stepping away, opening up, and holding things with a wide-open mind and a wide-open heart, and not being troubled by what the content is. We find our home in a spacious, open, relaxed field of awareness – a field of kindness, a field of respect, a field of freedom that holds all things. It is a really wonderful thing to open up to this wide field of attention where there is freedom to be found without changing anything. Doing that is a kind of superpower. It is a game changer in our life in many ways.

May you respect your thoughts, no matter how difficult or painful they are. Maybe they are messengers pointing to something deeper inside of you. They are the tip of the iceberg. You really want to start dipping down into the fullness of who you are and seeing what is there. Taking time to get to know all of who you are – not just the voice that's thinking in the head – is a way of respecting yourself. Thank you all very much.