

Thinking (5 of 5) Released Thinking

November 5, 2021

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

Munindra-ji, mindfulness, clinging, grasping, compulsivity

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We have come to the last talk on mindfulness of thinking. In mindfulness of thinking, thinking is just as much a valid subject for mindfulness as anything else, including breathing. The art of it, however, is to be mindful without thinking more – to not be practicing “mindfulness” when you are mindful of thinking.

Usually the breathing is a very good focus for meditation because it tends to be calming and settling, and it is a physical sensation. It tends to help us step out of the world of thinking so that can quiet down.

Thinking isn't always a good object for beginners, because it can pull us into itself so we start thinking more and more. But in principle, thinking is just as valid a subject for mindfulness as anything else. Sooner or later, it's wise to turn our attention toward thinking, especially if we've been meditating for a long time, and we have some ability to really look at thinking and see it – look thinking right in the eye, and study what goes on in it.

Thinking is a whole system. There is a whole complex of things that are involved with thinking, that comes into play. One of those things is our clinging, our grasping, our holding on, our stickiness, our compulsivity with thinking. In the end, we are not looking to stop having thoughts. Freedom is manifested in not having that stickiness with thoughts, and not clinging to thoughts – instead, having a state of mind – a consciousness, an awareness – that has released itself from thinking, even if thinking still goes on.

For this purpose, I distinguish between thinking and thoughting. Thoughting is just what the mind does. The mind is a thoughting machine. It just produces thoughts. They float up and float away. Thinking happens when we get involved in those thoughts. Sometimes it's appropriate to be involved, but more often than not, when we're involved there is some compulsivity, some clinging and grasping in our involvement.

We study thinking as a way of discovering where clinging is. It is a fascinating window into our clinging to thoughts. Whenever we are in a hurry, chances are pretty high that our thinking is compulsive. Our thinking has grabbed onto something and is holding on. The syndrome of hurriedness usually comes along with hurried thoughts, pushing thoughts, wanting thoughts, crowded thoughts, one after the other. Not only is the mind crowded with a lot of thoughts when we hurry, but sometimes we can feel the push and the compulsivity, if we allow ourselves to feel it. There is a kind of command in hurrying, like, “Don't pay attention to it, just get the job done – do what has to be done.”

To turn around 180 degrees and look at thinking itself is a real task. In terms of hurrying, it is possible to do things quickly without hurrying, so hurrying is an extra kind of compulsivity – we feel caught in something that has to be done quickly. It is possible to do things quickly without being caught.

What we are looking for in the Dharma is not to be without thinking or without thoughts, but to be with them without clinging to them. This is a very profound thing because thinking is all we ever cling to, unless you are at the edge of a cliff holding onto the railing – then you are clinging to the railing. In Buddhism, the clinging that we are generally addressing is the clinging that human beings are predominantly involved in all the time: clinging to ideas and thoughts. That is what we really cling to.

We don't see it that way because for example, if we are clinging to a person, we think we are clinging to that person. But if we are really quiet and steady our mind, we can see that we are not clinging to the person, unless we're holding their hand tight. We are clinging to the idea that person is in our mind – the associations, meanings, values, and desires we have around that person. This is clinging to ideas, to thoughts. It is fascinating to start seeing that. The recipe is not the same thing as a meal. If you cling to the recipe and never cook, you never have a meal. The map is not the territory.

When I was a relatively young Zen student, I had some challenges with my father – enough that I talked to my Zen teacher about it. And he made a comment that really struck me. He said, “Before your father was a father,

there was a time before he was a father. He was a person without any fatherhood, without being a father.” When he said that, I thought, “Wow. I’m only seeing him through the lens of being my father. He has a whole other side where he lives his life without being a father. I wonder who he is. I wonder how he is in those situations.”

We hold onto ideas of how it is. There is a little saying that came (I think) from Munindra-ji, an Indian vipassana teacher, who was a teacher for many of us. I knew him briefly. He said, “The thoughts of your mother are not your mother.” So we have these thoughts and ideas. We learn to release our thoughts from our grasping and clinging.

In Buddhism, the goal is liberation – freedom. Often the idea we’re holding on to is that / will be free when I am liberated. But maybe it doesn’t work that way. Maybe you will never be free. Those are just ideas and thoughts. If anything, what’s happening is that you are giving freedom to the world. You give freedom to your thoughts.

Freedom doesn’t mean we should think wildly, recklessly, and unwholesomely. The reckless, unwholesome, harmful thoughts that we think are a form of clinging or holding onto an idea – to some thing. When we are not clinging to anything, the thoughts will gravitate and flow towards what is wholesome and what is directly present, because they are not driven by desires or hatred. So, rather than you becoming free, you are giving freedom to your thoughts.

To free one’s thoughts is one of the great delights – to have thoughts relaxedly just appear. It is like a miracle that thoughts appear. Where do they come from? We can be quiet and still and watch a new thought be born. Where did that come from? It just arises and floats by, and goes away. A thought is not any different from a flower blooming and fading. It is not any different from the clouds forming in the skies and passing by. It’s not any different from a leaf floating in the wind, hovering, and finally landing somewhere – if we don’t identify with the thought.

To identify with thoughts is to be attached to little identification thoughts – “This is me, this is mine.” It is so wonderful to not make thoughts into “me, myself, and mine,” to not have to take them personally, to not have to do anything with them, and to not have to measure oneself by them.

When I was 13 or 14, my father took me aside to have a little father-son talk. I don’t know if it was intentional, but he said to me, “As you grow up, from time to time you’ll have bizarre thoughts.” I thought, “Okay.” I didn’t know what to do with that information. Lo and behold, at some point or other, I had bizarre thoughts. I thought, “Oh, my father told me that this might happen.” Because of that, I had no inclination to do anything about them, or to judge them, or to be horrified by them. I don’t even remember what they were. I realized: “Oh, they are just bizarre thoughts. They come and they go.”

Thoughts are kind of like a dime a dozen. They come and they go. The ability to step back from them and not automatically latch onto them is a kind of power. It allows us to choose which thoughts we will get involved in and which we won’t. That is where a certain kind of freedom resides: the freedom to choose what we think.

I think that the primary choice that we learn in this practice is mostly what not to do, and what not to think. “Oh, no, I don’t need to do that.” Sometimes it is very appropriate to actually choose what we think about. For instance, at the end of the meditation, we spend a little time choosing to think about goodwill and kindness.

This has a double purpose. It has the purpose of helping us stay free. To open the heart and not cling – just open ourselves and be available to the world in a kind way – hopefully clears the decks of our hearts so that we can just be available for the world. We are not clinging and holding on to me, myself, and mine. Doing this nourishes something very important in us, and it supports and helps other people. All this is possible, when we dedicate ourselves to thinking that way. But the thinking needs to be done in a free, relaxed, easy, calm way. To learn how to think, some of us need to relearn our thinking. But first, we learn how to be free of thoughts and release them.

May you explore, study, and ride the edge of ways to not cling to your thinking. You don’t necessarily have to let go of your thoughts, just let go of the clinging, and see what happens. Next week I’ll continue this series on basic mindfulness practice. I’m going to talk about something that we’ll call provisionally “mindfulness of mind.” Thank you very, very much.