

Introduction to Mindfulness (16 of 25) Simple Awareness of Thinking

February 5, 2024

SUMMARY KEYWORDS respectful, judgment, sourcing, inclusive, freedom, iceberg, words, images, freedom, balance, equanimity, wisdom, recognition, simple, breathing, body

Gil Fronsdal

Welcome to Monday morning's introduction to mindfulness meditation. In the fourth week we are discussing thinking.

Many meditators feel challenged by their thinking, and many are challenged *because* of their thinking. Some people are troubled by the simple fact that they are thinking in meditation. They feel that's wrong and they are trying to bat the thoughts away. Other people are not troubled by the fact that they are thinking but they're troubled by *what* they are thinking. Thoughts can sometimes have a huge impact on our mood or state of mind.

In mindfulness meditation, we're looking to become wise about thinking. We're not trying to get rid of thinking and we're not trying to judge our thoughts. We don't have to be critical of them. We're trying to understand how to be with thinking in the way that serves us best, that is respectful of ourselves and our thoughts, and that allows us to source our thinking from some of the deepest places within.

I think maybe "sourcing" is an industrial term. When you source material, you're looking for the material with which to build something or make something or for a place to make it. But we can apply that image within ourselves. We can source our thinking. Where is the source from which we're thinking?

Sometimes the source or origin of thinking is not deeply connected within us, even though the content of the thoughts affects all of who we are. However, it's possible to find a deeper source within. We can source our thinking in a profound place within so that when we think from that place it will have a very different effect on our mood, our state of mind, and our relationship to this world.

The way to become wise about thinking (since it is included in mindfulness) begins by understanding that we are not going to be enemies of thinking. Thinking is part of what we can be mindful of. The advantage of the kind of mindfulness practice we're teaching here is that we're not limiting attention to only breathing. Some meditation techniques that are quite effective in their own way might focus on only a narrow subset of human experience – for example, just the breathing. People use that approach to get concentrated and absorbed in that subset. But when we do that we're not including the full range of what it means to be a human being, the full range of human experience. In contrast, the brilliance of Buddhist mindfulness practice is that it can be inclusive of everything. Nothing is outside of its range.

As long as we're being mindful *of*, there's a place of freedom. We can find freedom, balance, equanimity, and wisdom. However, if we're mindful *by* anything – if the mindfulness is shaped by our emotions or our thinking – then we don't find the same degree of freedom and wisdom.

This way, our thinking is not sourced in our emotions. Our life is not sourced in our thinking. Rather, we discover a different way of holding our thinking, emotions, and bodily experience. Over time, as we learn how to be mindful, there's a point where we feel and recognize that everything we experience can be held by mindfulness and held in awareness. Everything is something we can be mindful of.

We understand that the act of mindfulness is a kind of freedom in and of itself. The act of mindfulness is not entangled, caught, or reactive. It's just a clear simple recognition: "This is what is happening." I remember when I first came to this understanding, it was theoretical. "Wow, in theory, this mindfulness that I am learning can be

directed to and include everything in my human experience. And if that's the case, then I can be free in all experiences." I became so happy. It was a revelation for me. I said, "Wow, to be able to live with that freedom ... that is possible now. Now I understand what it takes."

That insight gave me a lot of enthusiasm for really relying on mindfulness and having faith in it, as opposed to having faith in my thoughts and beliefs. I stopped having faith in worrisome thoughts about the future. I had spent a lot of time thinking about how challenging things were going to be for me in the future. I no longer had so much faith in reviewing the past and the resentments I had. Reviewing the past and reliving it was something that once had tremendous value. Of course, I didn't actively think that way, but I had been behaving that way. That's what my mind had been doing.

When I really started to have faith in mindfulness, I began to understand that how I invested myself in all these areas of life – how to be, how to think, what to think about – were not the important places to live. I learned to shift to something else: just mindfulness. We want to learn how to be mindful of thinking not only in order to let go of it. That shift is partly so we can have a different relationship to thoughts: to hold thoughts lightly and openly without being caught in them.

We also learn to be mindful of thinking because our thinking is just the tip of an iceberg. Thinking is often very deeply connected to other parts of ourselves. If we're lost in our thoughts, caught up in our thoughts, or think that navigating and negotiating the world is only through our thinking, then we're riding on the tip of that iceberg. But there's a whole big area to explore and discover below that tip.

That's when we enter into a greater fullness of who we are. For example, it's easier to be aware of thinking when you know how to be present for emotions. It's also easier to be aware of emotions if you know how to be aware of thinking. The two are deeply intertwined. It's fascinating to watch how when we think certain thoughts, the emotion follows. At other times we have certain emotions and the thinking gets changed accordingly. Seeing this influence back and forth more clearly is a way of stepping back and not being caught in that exchange.

It's easier to be aware of emotions and thinking if we know how to be mindful of the body. The body is a rich area of attention. The body is not just a corporeal physical event. It's connected to our deep life. We find it's easier to see the connection in the simplicity of breathing. Breathing is a way of protecting ourselves from being swept away in endless thoughts that spin and spin.

For today the exercise is to experiment with how simply you can know that you're thinking. "Simple" doesn't mean that we're condoning, participating in, or condemning our thoughts. It just means we step back – maybe two feet or two steps – and recognize, "Oh, that is thinking," with the recognition not caught up in the thoughts. So we're using a kind of thought to recognize that we're thinking. This might seem paradoxical or confusing, but the thought of recognition is really simple and not sticky, not caught in or stuck with whatever we're thinking. This is a powerful exercise if you can get the hang of it.

One thing that might help you with this is to notice whether you're thinking in words or images. Some people do predominantly one or the other. Some people do a combination of them, maybe at different times. And some people have never considered this. But if you can clearly recognize, "Oh, I think more in words," then you can explore where the source is of those words in the mind. Where in the mind do you have a sense that those words are being spoken? If you have a location, then you can step back and say, "Oh I'm thinking; I'm thinking in words." If you're mostly thinking with images, where are they being projected? Maybe a little bit in front of you. Then, "Oh I'm thinking, I'm thinking in images. That's what's happening."

As you go along today in your life, look for ordinary opportunities to recognize thinking. Recognize whether you're thinking in words or images. See how simply you can recognize that you're thinking without being caught in the thinking – almost like you've stepped away and you're looking back without being in the midst of the fray.

Thank you very much. I look forward to seeing you and being part of this exploration again tomorrow.