

Dharmette: Introduction to Mindfulness (4 of 5)

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So hello and welcome to this fourth talk that's providing an introduction to the basic mindfulness teachings at IMC.

And today the topic is mindfulness of thinking. And this is the last of the four beginning topics, areas of our life, before we start tomorrow to bring them all together into one whole. And so today, with mindfulness of thinking, there is occasionally some idea that, consciously or unconsciously, that thinking is the enemy of meditation, that somehow you're not supposed to think when you meditate. And I think there's a better idea about thinking in meditation, and that is that we don't want to be preoccupied in thoughts. We don't want to be swept away by them.

Sometimes in Buddhism they talk about being swept away by a flood, the flood of thinking, because it can be so strong, how strong the thinking is that we get swept away from, swept away. And it's not useful, sometimes, especially if the thoughts are deflating, discouraging, thoughts that are, the mood of thoughts undermines us. The more we get swept away in the thoughts, the more we get depressed, the more we get upset or afraid. And so a little bit, thoughts come along with the mood music. Thoughts are not simply innocent ideas that float by. If they're strong thoughts and preoccupying thoughts, there's often a strong mood or emotion that goes with them.

And it's kind of like the mood music in movies, that it's a pastoral, beautiful scene in the woods, on a path in the woods, that just seems pleasant and enjoyable, until the ominous mood music begins, and then our hair stands on end. We know that something terrible is about to happen. And we're very affected by the mood. And part of the reason why rumination is so deleterious for us is that mood that undermines us, it drains us, that kind of has a message of discouragement or a message of fear or a message of anxiety, something that you're kind of, drop by drop, we're filling our being with, conditioning ourselves by it.

And so to learn how to think better, to think wiser, to be a wise thinker, is part of *dharma* practice. To be a liberated thinker, to think in ways that are beneficial for us, that are helpful for us. Buddhism is not about ending up thought-free, but rather thought-wise, wise in our thinking. And so for that to happen, we need to spend some time getting to know our thinking, being mindful of it. And thinking is a completely valid subject for mindfulness, area of being mindful and discovering what's happening when we think, what's thinking about for us, how are we when we're thinking, what's the effect thinking has on us. And this can take years, you know, maybe a lifetime because it's always shifting and changing.

Thinking is like a tip of an iceberg representing so much more of what our life is about. And so to begin including thoughts as part of the subject of meditation in such a way that it helps thinking keep us present, helps us to settle, be more connected to ourselves rather than the opposite. And so there's a variety of ways of practicing with thoughts, some of them I mentioned in the guided meditation now. And sometimes it's invaluable just to leave them alone, if it's possible. Just ignore them. Let them be kind of in the back of the mind or let them be in a different room of the mind in a sense.

If sometimes we leave them alone, ignore them in a sense, then we're not feeding them. We're not supporting them. And they kind of slow down, quiet down by themselves. And sometimes, kind of related to that, is every time we're thinking, caught in thoughts, is a simple act of letting go of it, let it drift away, and settle down back into the breathing. Some people find it useful to have the exhale be the time they remember to let go of their thoughts. So thoughts creep back so easily, but if each exhale, let return to quiet, return to kind of a mental peace or calm without thoughts, over and over and over again, it's kind of like giving yourself a massage. And it's kind of like something in the brain, in the thinking mind, begins to relax.

And if we don't give heed to thoughts, we don't give in to them or keep feeding them, they kind of quiet down. In fact, all thoughts will fade away if we don't reinforce them. And in that regard, I think it's useful to distinguish the new English word, *thoughting*, from *thinking*. So the difference between what I'm saying here, *thoughting* is just what the mind does. It produces a thought. *Thinking* is a chain of thoughts, is a chain of associated thinking.

It's taking one thought and engaging it, feeding it, picking it up, adding to it, reacting to it, judging it. There's a kind of a cascading, a flood of thoughts can come along. And so thoughts are not where we get, our thoughts don't represent being caught. Thoughts represent just naturally the mind is a thought machine. It produces a thought. But it's possible to leave a thought alone, see it clearly, let it float up and float away.

In Zen, they sometimes talked about thoughts being like a small cloud drifting in an endless sky. Right? And that can certainly be the case in very deep, quiet, still meditation. You really see a thought just arises and it floats away. Nothing picked up, no reactions to it. So by just letting go, every time you notice your thinking, come back to your breathing, we stop feeding it. And the thinking mind quiets down sometimes.

But to be mindful of thinking is to turn around the attention 180 degrees to really look at thinking, to know and recognize, oh, this is thinking. How we recognize it is very important. If we recognize that we're thinking with aversion or discouragement, that, and it's oddly enough, just supports more thinking. To hate the thinking supports more thinking. To come to some conclusion, you know, I'm a bad meditator or I shouldn't be thinking, supports more thinking.

There's a way of gently, calmly, just saying, oh, look at this. There's thinking. That's a thinking mind. In a way that is kind of neutral, kind of equanimous, kind of calm, kind of peaceful, so that we're not kind of caught in the cycles of thinking, thinking about thinking, but just recognizing. And what I mean by thinking here, that's a problem, is discursive thinking, is this chain of thinking. There can be very simple thinking that's almost like just thoughting, thoughts of recognition. Oh, I'm thinking.

That's not the same thing as discursive thinking, commentary thinking, explanatory thinking, carrying on a conversation in the mind. That's the thinking with a capital T. But thoughting, oh, thinking, strong thinking, a lot of energy in thinking. Let me see if I can look at thinking, name it, look it in the eye, or this is thinking. There can be very simple instructions that technically would be called thinking as well. But it's a whole level, different kind of thinking that supports meditation and settling, supports seeing clearly, as opposed to this discursive thinking, this chain of thinking that we get caught in.

So to turn around and recognize, no, oh, I'm thinking. I like to call it looking thinking right in the eye, but lovingly, kindly. Sometimes just being seen clearly and recognized clearly is enough for thinking to fade away. I've had people who say something was wrong because every time they tried to be clearly mindful of thinking, thinking it would wander off and they couldn't be mindful of it. That's not a problem. That's a success because that means that the mindfulness of thinking wasn't perpetuating the thinking, and there was no more feeding of the thinking, and thoughts only continue if there's some kind of way in which the mind is involved with them. And seen clearly, they can fade away.

But sometimes they don't do that either. And sometimes it's useful to spend some time getting to know the thoughts. Let it be what it is. Don't make a problem out of it. Don't try to

make it go away or don't try to let it, you know, do anything except just kind of accompany it. Be present. What is this like?

Like it's a good friend who's really troubled, and you want to just take a walk with them in the park, accompany them, and hear them out so they can speak. And so be your own good friend who knows how to listen, where mindfulness becomes a deeper listening to what's going on in thinking, what is thinking? What's really happening here? Yeah. And just like walking with your friend, maybe the content of the words is less important, that you're attuned to the emotion that's being expressed through it, the fear they have, the upset they have. And you kind of relate to them that way.

So as you're listening deeply to yourself or your thoughts or watching deeply, if you think more in images, you start seeing that thinking is made up of different parts. There's the emotional part, and that's often the fuel for it. There's the physical part. What does it feel like physically to be thinking? The stronger the thoughts, the more likely we'll feel some kind of tension, pressure, constriction. Physically, in the area of the brain, the forehead, the eyes, could be someplace else in the body, that's clearly connected to thinking.

And then you might spend time feeling that physicality of thinking, maybe relaxing it on the exhale. If you think in words, what's the tone of the voice? What's the speed and energy of the voice? Whose voice do you speak with? And so there's kind of more things to know and feel. But again, not to think more, not to judge yourself in any kind of way. It's the opposite of judging.

Do the mindfulness of thinking as a way of caring for yourself like a good friend walking in the park, who's there to accompany, to know, to care for, to listen deeply, and to support a settling into the present moment. And that's the primary characteristic of mindfulness and mindfulness meditation, is to settle into here and now so you can find a useful way of being present to the experience you're having here and now. The danger with thinking, it takes you to there and then. It takes you into the past, the future, and other places, into fantasy. And you can be anywhere but in the present moment.

It's possible to be quiet and still enough, clear enough in mindfulness that you really recognize in the present moment, I am thinking. And that clear recognition without making a problem of anything makes a world of difference. So mindfulness of thinking.

So I would encourage you now today, for the next 24 hours, each day I'm adding five minutes to your extra meditation. And today I would encourage you to sit 25 minutes for some time extra today. Sit down to meditate. Before you go to sleep, find a way. Some of you are busy.

I would encourage you to do it anyway. And the carrot to offer you why is you might find you have more time after you meditate than less in some kind of magic or a special way.

And then also spend the day studying, paying attention to what effect your thinking has on yourself. Thinking is not effect-free, the affect, the impact, the influence thinking has on your body, your emotions, your heart, your mood, how you see the world. As you've noticed your thinking more, being mindful of thinking, what consequence does that do? How does that affect you? Become wise about the effect of thinking on you yourself mainly. And become wise about thinking.

So then, as I said, tomorrow then we'll bring all this together into the kind of a complete instructions and mindfulness. So thank you, and I hope that you become a good friend to your thinking.