

Freedom With Thoughts: Befriending Thinking

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So the theme for the day will be freedom with thoughts. In my early meditation practice, even though I knew better intellectually, I had a strong bias that meditation meant not thinking. I could relate to the breath, to embodied emotions, mind states, and moods, but thinking seemed inferior. It didn't belong. I wanted a mind with no thoughts. The attitude kind of supported an unfriendliness toward my thinking.

It always felt like an unwelcome guest that I wanted to leave as soon as possible. But as my practice developed, I began to see thinking more as natural and often useful human activity that actually is very useful in meditation. And I really learned to respect it and to appreciate it in a very different way.

So today, when I think about mindfulness of thinking, there are kind of three aspects I think are very important. The first one, which is one of the things that it's amazing how hard it is to do, is to recognize that we're thinking. In meditation, how often do we get lost in thought without recognizing it, right? And so this ability to recognize that we're thinking, even when we're not lost in an idea, is important. I've spent lots of time thinking about, oh, my breath should be this way or that way, da-da-da-da-da-da, the whole thing about my breath is this, and not realizing that I'm thinking about my breath, but not actually paying attention to it, not actually feeling it.

And so recognizing that we're thinking is huge. If you do that each time, that's a really important part of mindfulness of thinking. And second, when we do notice we're thinking, is discerning if it's helpful or unhelpful. Many of our thoughts in meditation are helpful. For instance, come back to the breath. Very helpful. My shoulders are up by my ears. Relax the shoulders. Very helpful, right?

Worrying, if you're in daily life, if you're stuck in traffic and you're worrying about being late, it doesn't get us there any sooner, right? Not helpful. But maybe offering a silent wish of loving-kindness to the driver next to us, may you be happy, might actually make us feel happier. So seeing whether thought is helpful or unhelpful is a way to really begin to purify a certain aspect of the mind. What are we nurturing? Are we nurturing worry? Are we nurturing loving-kindness? Are we nurturing trying to get the perfect meditation, or developing the ability to see clearly?

Trying to get the perfect meditation, by the way, doesn't work for anything. But developing the ability to see clearly really is forward-leading. So we want to recognize we're thinking. We want to know whether it's helpful or not. And third is learning to relate to our thinking itself with mindfulness and kindness, not as something to be ignored and thrown away as soon as possible, but to relate to it with mindfulness and kindness.

And I love what my husband calls it, kindness. I find that a really sweet, useful way of thinking of it. So for instance, rather than making ourselves wrong for worrying, we can say, ah, this isn't helping right now. Instead of, I shouldn't be worrying, perhaps we might offer ourselves, may I be free of suffering. So there's different ways of relating to our mind with kindness. And it's okay to be a little bit, you know, there's no right way to do it. Just find how kindness can show up for you.

And for me, often, if I'm really struggling, that's the easiest way to do it, is, oh, I'm suffering right now. May I be free of suffering. That's always been the easiest to access for me. Mindfulness itself introduces something wholesome to the moment. And much of the time, just being mindful is enough. You don't have to add anything to it. Just really being mindful, oh, here is worry, and that's enough. If the mind can be soft and kind around it, we really appreciate that any afflicted state of the mind, if you're mindful, you're already introducing something wholesome to it. It's already beginning to change.

So there's a couple of types of thinking that I want to mention. In daily life in particular, much of our thinking falls into two main categories that you'll easily recognize: discursive thinking and task-related thinking. And again, these happen in meditation also. Discursive thinking is like a kind of diffused thinking without a specific purpose, where the mind just kind of meanders or jumps from one thing to another. It's stories, commentary. We often call it the monkey mind, where the monkey just jumps from one branch to another, one thought leaping to another.

Sometimes we end up miles away from where we started. And I know in conversation, sometimes it's been interesting to me to backtrack where it started. It's like, wow, look how far

we've come. But we can easily get caught up in the more unpleasant forms of discursive thinking in meditation, worrying about our lives, fears of the future, regrets of our past. We can spend way too much time dwelling on what's wrong with our lives, with ourselves, with the world. Kind of jumping from one concern to another, compulsively worrying, rehashing painful things from the past.

We all have our patterns where we might get caught in what we call rumination, this kind of really unhelpful discursive thinking, just kind of negative thinking about ourselves. And we tend to go over the same territory over and over again. Really what mind is trying to do, it's trying to solve something that can't be solved by thinking, but we still keep trying to solve it by thinking about it. Like somehow, if we just keep thinking about it, we're going to be able to do something. And instead of giving us clarity, rumination keeps us entangled in our stories and adds to our suffering.

So it's really huge to be mindful of that when we fall into that, and to really be kind about it, because the rumination is some form of painfulness, some form of suffering. And so bring some kindness to it when it happens. Recognize it. But discursive thought can also be really enjoyable, even very entertaining. And those of you who have sat retreats, I think have all spent a little time in enjoyable discursive thought, fantasies, future plans that we enjoy thinking about.

And in daily life, that kind of discursive thinking can actually be really useful. It can foster creativity. I don't know if you've ever had the experience of trying to solve a problem by thinking about it, and then you just kind of go, okay, I'm stuck. I'm going for a walk. And you go for a walk and your mind's just meandering all over the place in a kind of nice, unfocused way, and you come back and the problem's easy to solve. Or it's happened after sleep. I wake up in the morning and, oh, why was that so hard yesterday?

So this is discursive thought. It has its place in our lives. It has its usefulness. It can be wholesome if it has good qualities, creative qualities. But in meditation, it's just very seductive. And it's not an unwholesome state. It's just, it's not what we're trying to do.

Sometimes it's so enjoyable. It's like, well, time's going by really quick this way. But appreciating this is a special time, this meditation, that we've given ourselves this gift of a day of practice or a period of practice. And we intentionally choose not to feed the wandering mind at that time. We intentionally choose to really keep coming back to the present moment and to really stay connected with that. And sometimes we have to remind ourselves that quite a bit.

The other kind of thinking that I want to mention is what we call task-related thinking. Task-related thinking serves what's needed right now. What's helpful now? And so, for instance, if you're cooking, it would be, okay, I'm making lunch, and next I need a lemon. Let me go find a lemon. It's all related to your task.

In meditation, it's simply staying connected with the breath or the body or whatever your meditation object is, or being here now. So helpful thoughts might arise. Like I mentioned, relax the forehead. Notice the attitude. Come back to the breath, right? You have these nice little voices that can come up and be helpful in meditation. They're very practical, brief thoughts about the present moment. They're useful.

Now, some of us have an inner narrator. I don't know how many of you relate to that, but it's just kind of someone in the background that's always commenting, right? Even though you might be really focused on the breath and staying with each breath, it's still back there commenting. And sometimes people ask about that. Oh, it's warm. There's pressure in the knee. Oh, that breath was really smooth. Oh, that breath was kind of rough.

I sometimes think of the narrator as a young child in the back seat, reading license plates out loud, reading signs out loud. They're just telling you everything they see, mindfulness out loud. But if we think of the mind as having a foreground and a background, where the meditation object is in the foreground, the narrator can stay quietly in the background. It's not a problem. People sometimes think, well, I shouldn't be having any thoughts. No, it's fine. Just let it be there. It's not a problem. You're paying attention here.

But something to really notice is if the narrator has a judgmental or harsh tone. I'm doing this wrong. I should be much quieter by now. My mind should be much calmer. My body should be blah, blah, blah. So that's no longer a narrator in the background. And so it invites us to notice that tone. There's something unwholesome going on. Let's notice it. Let's see it, how it feels. We get to investigate it, and meet it with kindness, right?

When judgment, harshness arises, meet it with kindness, meet it with mindfulness. What is this? It's not that it doesn't belong, go away. It's, oh, what is this? Oh, and it'll go away in its own time, might come back, depending on your conditioning.

And as discursive thinking settles, we discover a more receptive mode of knowing, right? Like if you turn on the light in a dark room, suddenly you see all the objects in the room, you recognize them, they're there. You don't have to figure it out. You just know them. You're not going to walk in and walk into things. You can see everything.

In the same way, in meditation, we can recognize that many objects of experience arise,

whether they're physical sensations, emotions, intentions. And it might be a wordless recognition, or it might be accompanied by clear thoughts of investigation. Either way, it's fine. It's a simple recognizing what's present, but just a little more receptive. It's like these things just show up. We allow them to show up. We're not chasing after them.

And if things are unpleasant, we're not rejecting them. There's nothing to be fixed, just an experience to be known. And from that receptive mode, we can just see both pleasant and unpleasant things come and go. Either is fine. It's this very open mode of allowing things to arise, be known, and go away.

So there are two important aspects of working with thinking in meditation. The first one is the willingness and commitment to set aside our concerns about our lives during a meditation session. Over the years, I found it helpful to be very clear about my intention at the beginning of my sittings. I would find often, when my life was, you know, I had a lot with work, I had a lot of things going on in my life, I'd spend the first 10 minutes thinking about work. And so I decided, okay, I have to really be clear that this sitting, I'm going to give my full attention just to my lived experience and put those things aside.

They're important. I'm going to put them on the shelf, put them on the side. And there's a way that even on a retreat, like a week-long retreat, I've got lots of sits, I can just let my mind do this, think about this and that, and I've got a whole bunch of sittings coming. But really, things start to transform when that commitment's there at the beginning of the sit. It doesn't have to be a big deal. It can be just a simple reminder of our purpose in meditation. Some gentle version of inclining the mind to stay present. Not a tight, I have to, but just an inclination. Yes, that's what I'm doing here. That's what I'm doing.

And the second, as I'm already starting to mention, is relating kindly and mindfully to whatever arises. We can use thoughts to remember intention, to return to the breath, to recognize any aversion or desire or doubt as they arise. But we can do that kindly, mindfully. So the Buddha taught that whatever a person frequently thinks about becomes the inclination of the mind. So if we repeatedly dwell on judgment, it becomes easier to judge.

It's like the mind's like a magnet. Whatever we're used to, that's what we're going to keep doing. It keeps attracting those thoughts in our mind. If we cultivate thoughts of appreciation and goodwill, it's easier to appreciate and to love. And it can become more the default.

Some of us who are particularly judgmental, and I've told this story before because it really reached me, one of my teachers, Joseph Goldstein, said he was sitting a retreat, a long retreat. And he was just so fed up with his judging mind. He said he was judging everybody about

everything, himself, everybody. And so he decided at the end of the sitting, he sat outside the meditation hall and then watched people walk in after the walking. And he just started counting his judgments. He said he reached a thousand before everybody was in the hall.

And that really made it clear how habitual it is. And it's just a habit of mind. And we've all broken habits. Maybe I used to bite my nails. I don't do that anymore. I used to tear apart my split ends. And I did that for years. I'd be sitting there talking to friends, ripping apart my split ends. It was really obnoxious. And yet I broke those habits.

So I began to appreciate that the habit of judging myself harshly, judging others harshly, would be something that I could begin to shift. And it's a huge difference between noticing somebody is, oh, they're really skilled at that, and they're not skilled at that. I was in a position of hiring, firing, and so I was looking for strengths and weaknesses. It's a very non-judgmental way of doing that, of discerning kindly. They're not really suited for that, you know, or that they're terrible. There's such a qualitative difference in the heart when we do that.

And so really what we, you know, and this is why the importance of really noticing these aspects of thinking, it's our thoughts that darken the mind, contract the heart. And so really seeing those clearly, not to extract them, but to develop the new habits of, not new habits, but to strengthen the habits we have of loving and appreciating. I've done that on purpose. I think I've shared this with you, where I spent a very conscious time at an airport. Somebody else had done it, so I kind of copied what they did. And I just sat there looking at every single person, very busy airport. I was waiting for about an hour.

And just the exercise was to notice something I like in each person. It could be really nothing, you know. And there was somebody who was dragging their kid, and immediately it's like, God, that's awful. I said, okay, that is, you know, their behavior is awful. But is there anything I can like in them? And they were wearing really nice socks. But just the looking for it was what was really important. The looking for it, the training in my mind to start noticing more the things we like, instead of this very strong bias we have for the negative.

So there's a classic Buddhist image that I think captures this really friendly relationship with our thinking. And it's the image of a muddy pond. If there's a muddy pond and someone stirs up the mud, the water becomes cloudy. But if the pond is left undisturbed, if you just leave it alone, the sediment will settle on its own and the water will clear naturally. And so our thoughts are much the same. The clarity comes not from fighting with them, but from relating to them with friendliness and allowing them to settle. They have their own time, and they'll just leave on their own.

But leaving the pond alone only happens when the mind is friendly, when the attitude is welcoming of whatever shows up. Then there might be ripples in the pond, but no mud. Mud doesn't get stirred up, just a little bit of activity. And Suzuki Roshi said, "When you meditate, don't be bothered by your thoughts." So I find that really helpful.

So the freedom we're cultivating is not freedom from thoughts, but freedom with thoughts. The freedom to recognize them, to discern whether they're helpful or not, and to hold them with mindfulness and kindness. So thank you.