

Freedom With Thoughts: Wise Internal Speech

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So throughout the day today, we've explored recognizing and befriending thinking, not automatically believing our thoughts, and perhaps discovering a little more freedom and relationship to them.

There's an old Chinese story. I know many of you have heard this story, but it's about a man rowing his boat through a thick fog. As he makes his way down the river, he suddenly sees another boat drifting directly toward him. And as he shouts, you know, watch where you're going, the boat just keeps coming. He gets angry and starts yelling insults at the other boatman. And then the boats collide, and as the fog lifts, he sees that the other boat is empty.

In that moment, his anger evaporates. There's no one to blame, no one to be angry at. And the story points to how quickly we fill empty boats with our thoughts, with our assumptions and judgments and stories. We don't simply experience life. We interpret it, narrate it, explain it, and often suffer because of the stories we tell ourselves.

The Buddha taught that we can take some responsibility for our minds. Not responsibility in the sense of controlling our thoughts. You know, most thoughts arise automatically. You know, if we sit quietly for meditation, we really soon discover the mind really does have a mind of its own. So thoughts come and go, you know, one after the other, often without invitation. And observation is certainly an essential part of practice. We see them come and go.

But the Buddha also taught something called *wise effort*, which is the sixth factor of the *Eightfold Path*. A very simple way of describing *wise effort* is that it's the effort to let go of unwholesome thoughts and states that arise and to cultivate wholesome ones that haven't yet appeared, or, if they're there, to support them, to help support them in coming back more

often. Because we often emphasize mindfulness as allowing experience to be just as it is, being receptive, letting go, not interfering. We sometimes don't pay as much attention to the other side of *wise effort*, to the cultivation of what's beneficial. Practice needs both. It needs letting go, and it needs nurturing.

And of course, simply by meditating regularly, or sitting day-longs like this, we're already cultivating many wholesome qualities. We're developing mindfulness, developing concentration, patience, equanimity. There are times when it can be very skillful to consciously incline the mind toward something helpful, toward goodwill, toward gratitude, toward compassion, toward curiosity.

Often one of the most helpful practices, as I mentioned before, is to simply drop the story we're telling ourselves and find the feeling in the body, in emotion, whatever feeling is happening in the body. Let the story go. But at other times, it can be helpful to tell a better story. And not a story that denies our suffering or pretends everything is fine, but a story that allows us to hold our experience differently.

So for instance, imagine being tired. It's near the end of, like, a really long hike, and suddenly you realize that you've taken the wrong trail. Instead of being five minutes from home, you're now way more than an hour from home. And it's hot, you're out of water, your feet hurt, you're tired, and you made a mistake. And you might spend the next hour or so trudging along angry with yourself for making a mistake, miserable and discouraged.

But what if, without denying any of those realities, you viewed it differently? What if you saw it as a hero's journey instead? Here you are making your way through difficulty. You're tired, you're thirsty, hungry, yet you're persevering. Suddenly there's a sense of dignity to it, a sense of presence. Suddenly, perhaps, there's appreciation for your resilience.

And so nothing changed externally, but something changed in the way the mind relates to that experience. And often that's all that's needed. Telling ourselves a better story, a more useful story, a more helpful story.

Many of us have been practicing this *Eightfold Path*. One of the things that we find particularly meaningful and challenging for many of us is practicing *wise speech*. And maybe some of us have, over the years, created some significant changes in the way we speak. You know, maybe we've learned to pause before speaking, to listen well, to ask ourselves whether our words were skillful.

One way of thinking about *wise thinking* is that it's simply internal *wise speech*. So the guidelines for *wise speech* apply just as well to our thoughts. So as we do when, you know, the

guidelines that we often like to use for wise verbal speech are the same.

So the first one is, is it true? So, you know, is it helpful? Is it kind? Is this the right time? So for instance, you know, I'll say something about each of them.

Is it true? I've known practitioners who say to themselves, I just can't concentrate, and then believe it. I once asked a student who held that idea, you know, I asked him to simply close their eyes and stay with three breaths. And he did it, you know, he concentrated well. And the problem wasn't concentration. It was a story he told himself.

Maybe his idea of concentration was half an hour without moving, but three breaths, you know how to concentrate. And you get lost and you come back, you can concentrate. Okay. And every time the idea comes up, I can't concentrate, it doesn't allow you to apply. So really, is it true? There's a lot of thoughts I've looked at in my mind that just are not true.

And we can ask ourselves, is it helpful? If we found ourselves planning something for the 10th time, is it actually helping? Are you actually going to do it better? Is something really going to improve? Is something going to be useful? Usually not.

Now I found, it's one of my favorite ways of getting caught, was compulsive planning, where I would just be planning something that was happening in the future that absolutely did not need more planning. And so then the next one is, is it kind? You know, the tone of voice matters. Some of us would never speak to someone else the way we speak to ourselves.

You know, barrage sometimes, you know, I know I did this in my early practice, of not good enough, not doing it right, you know, not a good meditator, you know, all the things that we can say to ourselves. You know, would we speak that way to someone we love? You're no good. Would we say that to someone we love? Would we say that to our child? We would encourage them, you know, we wouldn't say that to them.

And the fourth guideline to *wise speech* is, is this the right time to say it? Some thinking might be true, it might be helpful, might be kind, and worthy of reflection, but maybe not while meditating. You know, we can respectfully say to ourselves, I'll think about this later. Let's say, you know, you realize you really need to talk to someone about something and it came up during meditation. Oh, yeah. You know, of course, I'll call them later at three o'clock.

You know, one of the things that was very helpful in my own practice is to actually set a time or a day when I would actually do it. It kind of put my mind at ease to just, okay, I'll do it at 3 o'clock right after so-and-so. For instance, in daily life, you know, we might be at a job interview. And, you know, maybe it's not the right time to think about changing careers dur-

ing your interview, right? And these are really worthwhile thoughts, but just not during the interview.

So all those things really apply to our internal speech. And it's not that we want to make it a project, but as the mind starts getting a little bit clearer and we start able to see some of our dynamics, we can start considering this at times, especially when we seem caught by certain things or repeated patterns.

There seems to be one part of us that lives our lives moment by moment, experiencing our lives just as they unfold, you know, and often meditation, just one moment and allowing, allowing. And then another part that tells the story afterwards, that remembers our lives and draws conclusions about them. You know, oh, that was a good sit. Oh, I struggled during that sit. That was a hard one. You know, we tend to do that about our lives, you know, at the end of things. We kind of evaluate them.

But sometimes that storyteller isn't very accurate. And imagine going on a 12-day vacation. For most of the vacation, the weather is beautiful, the food is great, you spend time with people you love, you rest a lot, you just enjoy yourself quite a lot. But as you're going home, all of a sudden there's this unexpected storm and the flight's delayed and you miss your connection. Your luggage is lost. You end up spending a night sleeping on the floor at the airport.

And a week later someone asks you, how was your vacation? And you say, oh, it was terrible. You know, and, you know, was it? You still had 11 wonderful days. But those wonderful days, sometimes we don't even remember them, like, you know, a month later, two months later. But they weren't erased by the difficult ending. But that's what our storyteller seems to remember.

And what changed basically was a story about the vacation. And how much do we do this in our lives, in our relationships? Yeah. A really good example is when people get divorced. You know, they sometimes have the need to make, you know, here they spend like, you know, 10 years with someone they really loved and who had faults, but they were still a very lovable human being. And then they split up, and all of a sudden it becomes an evil person.

They're no longer this great person who no longer is a good fit, but it's a way of separating, of making the relationship not be a loss, but something, oh, we didn't want anyways. But it's not accurate. And how often do we do that? One difficult conversation, one unpleasant sitting, and the storyteller revises the entire narrative.

Mindfulness practice invites the storyteller to stay closer to our lived experience, so that we can better appreciate the moments we're actually living. As I mentioned earlier, the Buddha

taught, whatever person frequently thinks and ponders upon becomes the inclination of the mind. And attention is like food. Whatever we repeatedly feed grows stronger. You know, if we feed judgment, judging becomes easier. Resentment, resentment becomes easier.

If we cultivate appreciation, goodwill, compassion, those too become more available. If we're used to looking for what's wrong with people, that's what we'll tend to see. But if we intentionally notice what's beautiful, generous, or kind, that habit grows. The same is true toward ourselves.

We can slowly shift from focusing primarily on what we think is wrong with us, what we need to fix, what we need to improve to be happy, and instead recognizing what's healthy, kind, and good within us, and not see ourselves as a constant repair job. Okay.

You know, perhaps an expression of *wise effort* is learning to pause before we fill that empty boat of our lives with stories. We can ask ourselves, is it true? Is it helpful? Is it kind? Is this the right time? Sometimes the most skillful response is simply to set the story down and return to direct experience.

At other times, it may be wise to tell a better story. One that supports our dignity, curiosity, compassion. Our stories are stories. They're not the fullness of our lives. They're not the entirety of who we are, but they shape the world we inhabit.

And perhaps just one of the most beautiful expressions of this *wise effort* is learning to tell ourselves stories that support all this, all this greater kindness and wisdom that's there. Freedom with thoughts does not mean having no thoughts. It means developing the wisdom to know which thoughts to set down, which thoughts to question, which thoughts to gently postpone, and which thoughts to nourish because they help us live with more love, with more presence and ease.

So thank you. Thank you all for sharing this day of practice. And we'll end the way we usually end our retreats, with sharing the benefits of the practice.

You know, may our thoughts increasingly become vehicles of awakening rather than obstacles to it. May all beings be happy. May all beings be peaceful. May all beings feel safe. And may all beings everywhere be free.

Thank you.