

Thinking Instruction & Guided Meditation

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So most of us, you know, like being calm, not having a lot of thoughts running around our heads. And because of that, it's often easy to judge any thinking that arises as not belonging, not being part of the meditation process. Something's going wrong. And the idea is not to get rid of thoughts, but to encourage them to be helpful to us, to be skillful thoughts, to be useful for us.

And we use thinking in meditation. It's an important part of meditation. We use intentional thinking to bring us back to the breath, to encourage us when we're feeling scattered or uninspired. You know, we use them to help us observe things sometimes, to remind us to pay attention to a hindrance, to remind us to relax the body. You know, oh yeah, I'm going to drop my shoulders. Shoulders are tense. You know, just little thoughts that are helpful thoughts.

But obviously, you know, as many of you have found, many of your thoughts are not so helpful. And some of them are fun, you know, they're enjoyable, but some of them actually hurt us, you know. And so the idea is that we're gradually shaping our minds, you know, this gradual process of making our thoughts be helpful in our lives and in meditation. You know, what we're doing is really not so much trying to shape anything, but trying to see the thinking process as it arises and to let it come and go, and not to get lost in it, not to engage in it when it arises.

So what we want to do in this particular sitting is just spend a little time sharpening our ability to see when thoughts arise and when they go away. Just see how they can just come and go without us having to jump aboard with them. You know, the mind is really restless, you know, and even in the depths of retreat, that sometimes happens. You know, we can drop to the body, to how the body feels being that restless.

You know, I've done that, you know, sat down in the morning sometimes, you know, like with a million things to do. My brain's just moving around at extra-fast speed. And, you know, I just feel like, you know, bees are buzzing in my head, you know, a little bit like a tension in the head. My eyes might get tight, you know. And so if I turn to the body, then just start getting into the body experience of thinking, how the body experiences thinking.

Sometimes when we worry, our shoulders get up by our ears before we know it. We drop into the body. What is our experience of thinking? You know, and as we mentioned before, you know, I think maybe Matthew mentioned that, you know, sometimes we might notice that our thinking is just repetitive, you know, repetitive planning or repetitive worrying, just absolutely not helpful repetitive thinking. And we can recognize it as such, you know, and if needed, we can see an emotion fueling it.

Because sometimes, you know, fear or worry are like right underneath certain types of thoughts. And we can just go right to the emotion, how we feel that emotion in the body. Where in the body is that worry? And turn our attention not from the thoughts, but to the experience of the emotion underneath.

You know, and I've mentioned this before, you know, one of the things to really realize is the impact of some of our repetitive thoughts, like impatient thoughts. For me in particular, you know, something I've, you know, had to work with a lot, these thoughts of how much longer, you know. You know, and we're waiting for the next thing, the next thing, you know. And, you know, one of the things I realized one day is when we're doing that, we're actually saying this moment isn't worth living. This moment is not worthwhile to be alive for, you know.

And it was like, wow, you know, that's really what I am saying to myself, you know. And I started turning to that moment. What is this moment like? What is this moment like?

And, you know, one other thing, you know, we all have different ways of thinking. You know, some of us think a lot in words, and some of them think in like full sentences, sometimes phrases, sometimes a little of each. Some of us get lots of images. Images are kind of thought. And so some get a mix of both. Some get a whole thought without particular images or words, and it just shows up fully formed, you know.

So be aware that these are the, you know, these are just these normal variations among individuals of how these things show up in our minds. Sometimes when images arise, you know, instead of saying thinking, we might say seeing, because what we're doing is looking at a face, you know, a really strong visual. But it's just, it's not like you have to get it right.

So one other thing about thoughts, you know, is as I spoke about before, having the fore-

ground and background. You know, if thoughts aren't compelling, they're just like sometimes we have a little narrator saying, oh, you're doing really good, you know. It's not really asking you to engage in it. You know, pat me on the shoulder, you know, you're doing really good. And it just keeps going kind of in the background. It's fine to just let it be. You can just stay in the foreground.

The idea is that if a thought becomes compelling and it just takes over consciousness, really notice it. Notice it arise and see if you can not jump on it and get lost in it. That's the art, not to engage with it. There are times for this. Meditation is not one of them.

Okay. So let's sit. Let's go ahead and close your eyes, find a comfortable seated position. And before we settle into the meditation, into paying attention to the breath, we'll spend a little time just observing the thinking process.

So for the next little bit, you know, don't try to think and don't try not to think. The idea now is to just wait, and as you sit quietly, just wait for anything that arises and see if you can notice a thought arise. And you can notice it do its thing and then notice it pass away. And then wait again for the next thought to arise.

So a little bit like you're standing on a path, you know, and people might be coming and animals might be coming by. You're just standing there, waiting to see, oh, there's another, you know, oh, there's a cat, oh, there's... So with that quality, just watching the thoughts. You may notice the thoughts arise by themselves, appear, they stay for a little while, sometimes a very short while, and they fade away. Just knowing them as they come and go.

Now allow the attention to gently settle on the breath or on the body, carrying that same interest, that same receptive, watchful interest. If thoughts stay in the background, just let them be there. If the thought pulls your attention away from the simply recognized thinking and return back to the breath or body, just resting on the breath. This thing intimate with each breath, connected.

And we can be like a mountain, grounded in this body, still, strong, fully here. The mind might wander away, but we can return and feel ourselves here, in the present. And when thoughts arise, they're like clouds drifting across the sky, coming and going away. Some might linger a little bit longer, some might move faster, but the mountain remains unmoved. The mountain doesn't chase the clouds, it doesn't judge them, it doesn't try to hold on to them.

If the attention has drifted, gently bring it back to the breath or to the body, to the center, allowing ourselves to connect with our home base, with our home. So much of what we think is just conditioned, it just shows up, and it's not necessarily helpful. But we can let thoughts

be. We don't have to pick them up, and we don't need to get rid of them. We don't need to manipulate them.

And one way of holding it is that all thoughts self-liberate. You really can't hold on to them. Try to watch a single thought, and it's gone before you can really explore it. We have unhelpful thoughts. It's enough to just notice them. We don't have to believe them. We don't have to support them.

Just by observing them, seeing that they're just thoughts that come and go, they loosen their grip on us. They lose their power over us. So I want to end with a quote from Suzuki Roshi. It's been quoted and re-quoted in many different ways, but I think this is close to what he said. "Leave your front door and back door open. Allow your thoughts to come and go. Just don't serve them tea."

So thank you. So just a couple of announcements...