

Instruction: Mindfulness of Thinking

Gil Fronsdal

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As we begin, I'd like to offer an analogy as an introduction to the topic of mindfulness of thinking. Maybe you've had the experience of going to see a movie in a movie theater, and if you're wise, you don't go early because of all the advertisements. But still, you go, you know. You would be late, so you walk in. It's clearly dark. Clearly, the advertisements are blaringly loud on the screen, but you're not interested in them. You actually kind of choose not to even look in that direction, or if you do, you just don't get pulled in.

And it's clear you're in a movie theater: high ceiling, and you're happy to see there's not many people, and it's very spacious and clear. It's all very nice. But then the action-packed movie you came to see begins, and you're no longer in a movie theater. Now you're in the action. You're completely in the film until someone near you starts shooting popcorn really loud. And you get pulled out of the movie, and now you're back in the movie theater.

And you glance at the screen, and it's just like stuff is happening on the screen, but it's nothing to do with you because you're concerned about the popcorn. I'll try to adjust the mic shortly. But thoughts are like that. They're the movie. Sometimes there is a movie. Some people think more visually.

For some people, it's a storyteller. We get pulled into the world of our thoughts. We live in them, in the way that we would live in the movie we're watching. And sometimes that's fine. But we lose our life sometimes in this two-dimensional, smaller world of thoughts and ideas. And what we lose is, we lose the whole.

We lose the whole experience of what it's like to be in our own room, the room of our hearts, the room of our body. The whole experience here, that all our senses could be awake. And the whole can include thoughts and thinking, but as part of the whole, thoughts. We don't

live in the thoughts. We live in something bigger. You're living in a wider field of mindfulness of the body that includes everything.

And that allows for the harmony, the homeostasis, the settling, the steadiness, to kind of just almost arise by itself if we stay close to the home. If we live in the movie, the mood music is going to affect you. If we live in this movie, the chances are that's the world of attachments coming into play, of fixations. So often, anxiety is born from the movies we're living in and imagining. And what's marvelous about this process of waking up to the whole is that nothing needs to be rejected. Nothing needs to be.

It isn't like we have to get away from anything. Nothing needs to be rejected. Nothing needs to be accepted. But rather, we're opening up bigger. In a sense, we're becoming bigger than any bigger part. To be awake is to have this very peaceful, peaceful awareness.

Peaceful clarity that includes it all, and everything can be there. So mindfulness of thinking is an important part of mindfulness, but we wait until well into retreat to introduce it. Because if we did it too early, like the very first thing we instructed you, probably it would result in, not at the best, not mindfulness of thinking. But now, mindful thinking—or rather than mindfulness, it would be thoughtfulness. And there are people who confuse mindfulness with thoughtfulness.

They think that the world is negotiated through their thoughts. So as long as they're thinking about their experience in the present moment, they must be mindful. But if it's more than something, a phrase, a deep phrase, or a very simple sentence, chances are we're caught in the movie. Mindfulness of thinking is to have an awareness that knows we're thinking, sees we're thinking, feels we're thinking, but is not living in the thinking. And that's not easy to shift to.

There are people—they don't. No one really thinks this way, I believe. But it's as if who you are is your thinking. And part of the reason it's scary to let go of thoughts or not be living in them is then there's something in us that feels like, then I don't exist. It's the thinking that tells me I exist, that confirms that I'm okay, that I'm alive.

All the familiarity, all the reinforcement that me, myself, and mine is being repeated by how we think. So of course we're going to live in the thoughts. The famous statement that “I think, therefore I am” is not a Buddhist statement. The closest Buddhism gets to something like that would be, “I am, therefore I am.” So the simplest way of being mindful of thinking is with a very calm thought, the calmest thought you can evoke, to say to yourself, “I'm thinking. There's thinking. Thought.”

In such a way that you're kind of stepping away to get the big picture. Look at that. Wow. Maybe with that kind of attitude. "Look at that! It's a thought," and that's radically different than being in the thinking, being the thinking.

So don't underestimate the tremendous value of taking that. Some Buddhisms, they talk of the backward step, and being able to gaze at it. It's like being in the movie theater, and it occurs to you, you know, there's more going on here in the theater than the movie. Let me step back and look at the whole. There's a lot of people eating popcorn, or something.

Oh, there's a big ceiling. So simply to know thinking, but to experiment with that simple label, so you can feel that you're saying it slowly, slow mindfulness. Just, oh, you're stepping back. You're trying to get the overview. Oh, here's a mind that's thinking.

And then, if it's interesting in the slow mindfulness movement, it's useful to get to know the ecology, the ecosystem of thinking, because we're always interested in the whole, not getting caught in the part. So, how does thinking fit into the whole of who we are? And so, thinking is made up of different component parts. It's useful to know, for example, do you tend to think more in words or more in images? Both are allowed. Different people specialize in different ones.

Some people do a combination of both. But if you see and know that that's how it is for you, that helps you to step back and see the bigger picture. Oh, there's the images. There are the words. Is there a mood in your movie? Is there a mood with the images that are coming?

Is there a mood with the words? Is there a tone of voice? Is the tone of voice harsh? Is the tone of voice gentle? Is the tone of voice anxious? Is it confident, or is it neutral in some way?

Same thing with the images. What's the speed of your thinking? Do you think in rapid fire? A lot of energy goes into thinking. Or is it very gentle and soft and slow? For people who meditate, we can sometimes discover a variety of different qualities of thinking.

Sometimes thinking feels very solid. It's the most solid thing in the universe. It's weighty, serious, important, authoritative. Sometimes thinking is wispy, is light. Has no substance, just like a cloud drifting in a sky. If you try to put your hand through the clouds, there's nothing, no resistance.

Put your hand through the thought, there's no resistance. It's almost not there, just floating by, very thin, getting thinner and thinner, weaker and weaker. Is there stickiness with the thought? Are you being pulled into it? Is there an addiction to the thought? Is there a strong compulsion?

Are you glued to the thought? Is there a really strong rubber band to your thinking? So if you let go of your thoughts, it's kind of like just stretching away in the rubber band. So the rubber band will bring you right back. You can't really get away from it. Or does it feel like, oh, these thoughts are a dime a dozen, and I can let go of them easily?

There's no problem. There's no, I'm not really attached or so concerned with them. In fact, I hardly notice them. The thinking is in the background. No problem. Like, foreground can be my breathing or the present moment.

So as we're sitting here, maybe closing your eyes, maybe coincidentally, maybe you are thinking right now. What happens if you become aware of your thinking itself? What is your relationship to your thoughts? Are you living in them? Are you believing them? Are you seeing the world through them?

Is the attitude which you have arising out of what you're thinking? Is the attitude and emotion you have the source of how you're thinking, what you're thinking? Right now, you have permission to think, so you can look at it. Do they get stronger as you pay attention to them, or are they shy? Do they disappear? If they do, just wait; they'll come back.

What is the ecosystem of thinking? Is there physicality to thinking? You might have seen someone thinking very hard, and they have frowning on their forehead, and it's all squunched up. Clearly, there's physicality in their thinking, because your thinking. Have any tension or pressure associated with it? Do you have any pressure or tension?

Is there any kind of gathering and centering of where thinking is? Maybe a slight contraction or solidity in the body, a coagulation, mental mentality. Is there in you a location for thinking? Or does your thinking come—you know, occur? It's really the whole universe thinking. It's so big.

Or is it mostly in the head? Is it mostly somewhere between the ears and the head, or behind the forehead? If you think in words, where's the speaker? Where's the speaker system, the loudspeaker? Is it a very discreet place, or is it a diffuse place?

If you think in images, where's the screen? Where's the projector? Some people think in images. It's almost like there's a screen in front of their physical eyes, even with the eyes closed. Is there any tension in the eyes when there are images? Sometimes the physical eyes tighten up slightly.

Stay focused. If there's a lot of repetitive thinking, of continuous thinking, doesn't want to stop, what's the emotion that comes with those thoughts? What's the emotion from which they come? And if there is an emotion associated with thinking, let that be part of the whole

by simply knowing the emotion and feeling the emotion as part of your body by how it's expressed or activated in your body.

So from time to time, you can practice mindfulness of thinking this way: to be curious, to be present in a relaxed, slow way, to the different component parts of that ecosystem of thinking. And at some point, when it's been acknowledged, seen, known, maybe you can continue to be mindful of it, but know it together with breathing. Accompany your thinking mind with a mind that's grounded in the breathing. Maybe a gentle rhythm, with the rhythm of breathing, gentle rhythm, of touching into the thinking mind, knowing it, feeling it. So that the rhythm of breathing protects you from giving your life energy, giving away your attention into the thoughts.

Stay aware. Stay awake. Not giving away your attention, getting lost in the thoughts. And it's completely fine to leave your thinking alone if those thoughts are in the background. If in the foreground of attention maybe is your breathing, maybe is your bodily experience, you don't have to be anxious or concerned that you're thinking.

If they're gentle in the background, not interfering, where on their own they can be part of the whole. So after all these words about thinking, let's turn our attention to the breathing. Maybe ever so gently taking a longer inhale and just slightly longer exhale. Maybe coming to the natural end of the exhale and then releasing some more. Maybe seeing if, with every exhale, you can steady yourself on the exhale.

Maybe in the way that you would steady yourself to put thread through the eye of a needle, following the tip of the thread all the way through the needle. With every exhale, for a while more, steadying yourself, quieting yourself, settling yourself. With the exhale. In the exhale. And seeing if it could be a steadying into ease, a steady ease, an easeful steadying.

No hurry, as if you have all the time in the world, just the exhale. Maybe like a robot steadily moving through the water, and the water washes off the sides of the boat. Maybe the steadiness with the breathing. If there's thinking going on, let it just wash off the side of the steadiness. And on the inhale, there's a filling, expanding of the body.

And perhaps, if it's easy, to let also the inhale be an expansion of awareness. So awareness gets emptied of thoughts and becomes wide, large, with enough room for everything. Part of the ecosystem of thinking is how much space there is around your thoughts. If there's a lot of concern about something, the space gets very small, claustrophobic, pulled in tight. As you breathe in, with the expansion of the inhale, expanding body, torso, let there also be an expansion of awareness.

So your awareness—it's like giving breathing room, lots of breathing room, expanding the space of awareness to be much bigger than whatever you're concerned with. And how big does the space of awareness need to be so you can have some ease with what is happening? Oh.

And as we come to the end of the sitting, is there anything you might have learned? A new way of being with your thoughts, your thinking. A new way of being mindful of thinking that helps you not be glued to your thoughts. To help you be more at ease with thinking yourself. It maybe helps you remember to steady yourself here in the present.

Maybe with the exhale, steadying yourself into a deeper connection to yourself. So, from one perspective—maybe for some of you, an all-too-obvious perspective—that was a lot of words, and that meditation, a lot of ideas and information. I'm hoping that, even maybe it kept you a little bit away from your meditation in the way you'd like it to be, that it was a useful exercise. It'll serve you for the rest of your life. So the cost is small.

And it was a lot. You don't have to remember it all. Even if you remember one thing that's new, that might be enough for you. I kind of trust each person takes in, in some deep way, what is most useful for you. So maybe one thing, that's enough.

I think it's invaluable for most people to begin finding a way to shift their relationship to their thinking. And it's probably fair to say that there's a lot of room for a healthier relationship to thoughts than what people have, or a freer relationship where we don't lose ourselves in thoughts or give ourselves over to thoughts. One of the most wondrous things about a human being—there's many wondrous things. One of them is our capacity for awareness. And that awareness gets lost sometimes because we give it away, not consciously, but we let it just go, pulled into the world of thoughts, and we're kind of not even knowing.

We forget, you know. Of course, we're aware when we're thinking, but we're not consciously aware. And some of the most wondrous things about a human being have a chance to come into fulfillment when we're really not lost in thought, caught in thought. The fulfillment of our capacity for love requires something. For many people, it is shifting the relationship through thought, their thoughts.

Sometimes love is born through our thinking. That's okay, but the fulfillment of love is not found there. So to be able to shift your relationship, to make room for, allow for, this wider ecosystem to operate together cooperatively. To allow the whole to come back into harmony. Generally, that's how it's understood in ecology, that if you leave an ecosystem alone, remove its external influences, it'll find a way back to harmony.

The thing about us, the external influences, in a sense, are the constructing mind, the story-making mind. So if we can become bigger than that. If that idea makes sense, it's kind of lovely because everything then is included, even the constructing mind. So thank you very much.

Some of you heard the story, and then I'll stop speaking. That when I did a three-month retreat at IMS with Joseph Goldstein and Sharon Salzberg, when I alternated between seeing the two of them for practice discussions. At the end of each practice session with Sharon, she would very happily and nicely say, "Enjoy." And I thought it was just a nice way of saying goodbye. I didn't think about it much.

And somewhere about halfway through the retreat, I said, "Wait a minute! She means it." Enjoy.