

Thursday Morning Guided Meditation

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So these beginning days of the retreat had to do with the cultivation aspect of practice, and all the qualities that are being cultivated. It's useful to think of them as being deeply rooted in the body. Their states of being: the more we can open into the body, feel the body, the more space, room, and grounding there is in these states. So trust and faith, confidence in well-being, happiness, contentment, and instability, steadiness, settleness.

And then today the instructions will be on *mindfulness of thinking*. And this is a very significant instruction, and it's kind of like the pivot for going from the cultivation side to the insight side. The three things to see in a new way, three ways of seeing in a new way, and the word insight, or seeing. It involves a direct experience of our present-moment experience, and that too, it turns out, is very much supported by being grounded in the body.

It's the physical, direct experience of the body that is one of the primary ways for opening to what's called insight, to see in a new way. So this is partly one of the reasons why cultivation is so important. We're cultivating something that belongs to the body, lives in the body, flows and pervades the body. We're becoming more at home in the body. So that the body can become the home for insight, the body is the reference point for a deep new way of seeing.

And *mindfulness of thinking* is a very significant pivot for this because thinking is often a way that people are not in their body. Thinking is a way we're kind of lost in the ether, lost in the thoughts and mind. Thinking is a way in which we color how we experience our experience, how we know our experience, how we know the body—if we're at all in touch with it. Thinking can put a tremendous filter over our perception, over our eyes, and we don't see directly; we see through that filter.

And so, thinking is not meant to be a problem for meditation, just generically a problem. But we are learning to have a new relationship with thinking, to shift how we think, so the thinking

doesn't predominate. So one of the things that we can sometimes discover is that there are different ways of thinking, different kinds of thoughts. And one distinction that maybe is useful here is the intensity of thinking, the strength of it.

Sometimes thinking can feel like a fire hose has been turned on, or just like a waterfall that's on. It's just like cascading, and the thoughts are nonstop and just flowing, and it's like the thoughts have hijacked the mind. We can maybe successfully let go of what we're thinking about for half a second, but we're just pulled right back in. The gravitational force of thinking is very strong, or the stickiness between us and the thoughts is quite sticky.

We're thinking, but not just thinking, but we're kind of stuck to it. We're attracted to it. We're being pulled into it, and that flow can be quite strong. The analogy of a fire hose or a waterfall maybe is not the best one for you, but what I like about it is that those are noisy. If you're in a big waterfall, there's a roar that can happen, and the roar is distinct from the water flowing.

And the roar can just seem to be constant. You might know that the water drops are small little drops; they're coming and going by intellectually, but the roar seems to be just constant, vibrating through your body. When the thinking is strong enough, it has an aftereffect or an influence or a feeling that it provides into the body, of somehow lending the thoughts a feeling of constancy. Lending them a sense, even a sense of permanence, like this is how things are.

And there might be a sense of pressure in the body, a sense that the body is activated in some way because of what we're thinking about. There might be an emotion that has been activated because of how we think, or it might be we have an emotion that's activated the thinking. And this wider scope of what thinking is—that's not just thoughts, ideas, images—but it's also this kind of field of sensations, emotions that can kind of feel like a big ball of stuff. And the paradox of the world of thinking and meditation is that the stronger the thinking is, the more people tend to succumb to the delusion of permanence.

This is how it's always going to be. Even if the thoughts themselves are coming and going, there's something about how they live in us and the effect they have on us. That, you know, this is, "I'm stuck. This is how things are." This belief: "This is how I always am. This is who I am, and it's like this always. The world is this way, and that's how it's going to be."

As thinking quiets down, and rather than becoming a mighty stream or river, there are other kinds of metaphors that are sometimes used. One is a small cloud drifting peacefully in a vast, empty blue sky. The cloud has no weight. You put your hand right through it. It kind of just has no pressure on us. It just floats by, very light.

Another metaphor is sometimes a thought is a single drop of water, a dewdrop on a leaf. Just, “Oh, look at that beautiful crystal of a dewdrop there. Wow.” There’s no magnetic force. There’s no sense of authority, no sense of pressure connected to it. There’s no sense of strong emotions. We’re not so identified with the dewdrop, except we think it’s beautiful.

It’s possible to have thoughts arise very simply, very quietly, calmly. That you see just a single thought as a thought, and it can even feel beautiful. “I’m looking at the dewdrop. Wow. Isn’t that just a gentle, quiet, floating thought going by?” But as thoughts become quieter and calmer, they don’t create as many filters. They don’t create so many aftereffects. They don’t spread their influence in our body.

Sometimes I think of thinking as the puppeteer in my experience because I have certain thoughts, and I can feel like it might tighten up certain muscles. I pull in my belly, and my shoulder goes up. My forearms tighten a little bit—all kinds of places—and the puppeteer is doing its work because of that strong connection. As thoughts get quieter, you’ll notice that it no longer has that effect on the body, and the body has a chance to relax and soften.

And as the thoughts become quieter, simpler, and you see the thoughts just come and go, maybe even in a gentle way, the sense of stability is here in the body, a sense of stability in the mind, steadiness. The mind is at rest, at peace, stable, continuous, just here. And the thoughts are no longer filtering the mind. Then, rather than seeing permanence, what the mind will perceive is how things change, the changing nature of things.

And so it’s kind of a paradox that the more actively we think, the more likely we’re going to fall into some kind of delusion of permanence, constancy. The less we think and the more quiet, the more that delusion falls away, and the more we see. We become still and stable. The mind doesn’t change so much. But then what we see is that all our experience is changing, and it becomes all our experience as we get deeper and deeper into it, in this world of change.

It’s kind of, at times, you can’t force yourself to see it this way. It can feel like a gentle, calm flow of a stream. Just flowing, everything’s flowing and moving. Everything is changing, and we’re no longer in the delusion of permanence.

So, being mindful of thinking is kind of key to begin understanding how thinking tricks us, how thinking influences us, affects us. To understand the ecology of thinking, to be able to be mindful of thinking in a very simple way, very quietly, to step kind of two steps back from your thinking mind and observe it. “Look at that. I’m thinking, and there’s tension in the mind as I think. There’s agitation. There’s a lot of energy.”

We start stepping back and having kind of a little bit more of a distant view, gazing upon it

rather than living in it. And then we start becoming wiser about our relationship to thoughts. We see that it's possible to know we're thinking and not be swept away in the thoughts. It's possible to know we're thinking, and oddly enough, it's also possible to know we are being swept away. But if we step back and see that, see it, know it: "Oh, this is how it is."

And so what we've taught so far—*mindfulness of breathing*, body, emotions—are all at play as we do *mindfulness of thinking*. How has your breathing been affected by your thinking? Thinking can change. You might have a perfectly peaceful meditation, mind's minding its own business quietly. And then you have this amazing memory of someone you have a vendetta with, and you start thinking about it, and your breathing has changed.

"Oh, that's a key. That's pretty key. Maybe I can pay attention to my breathing and how it's changed." And sometimes that's enough to not be caught by the thoughts. Maybe body sensations changed. I've been sometimes very grounded, stable, centered in my body, kind of centered in my belly. And then I've thought about one of these terrible betrayals that a girlfriend did, and I'm no longer in my belly.

Like, there's energy that just flows up into my head, and it's all about this. You know, my center of gravity has changed just because I had this thought about fifty years ago. How could that be? And so, what's happening in your body when you get caught up in thoughts? And what's the emotion?

Does your thinking arise out of an emotion, or does the emotion arise out of your thinking? Just that can give you a little distance. Realize that you don't have to be caught in the thoughts or spinning on them. Look for solutions in your thinking. Figure out a better past through your thoughts. Plan a better future.

There are better things to do, and this trust and well-being and stability that can be discovered here and now teaches us there are better things to do than spin out in our thoughts. So, to begin, and maybe, if it's okay with you, to begin by what you trust, where you have the faith in this practice, or what you have confidence in, in terms of being present here and now. And does any of that confidence exist in your body? Can you make a small adjustment in your posture to give a little bit more vitality to the confidence? Maybe sitting up a little straighter.

And then there's your breathing. Maybe begin with three deeper breaths than usual. Longer exhales, relaxing into your confidence, settling, and then letting your breathing breathe normally. And then feel, sense: is there any way in which there is some well-being, some good feeling that comes from having been on retreat these days? Even if you feel discomfort, is

there also some feeling of calm or contentment or peace? Any sense of well-being that lives in your body?

Maybe a few moments of breathing with your body, but feeling a global experience of your body—a wide, broad awareness of the body—that's more than any specific sensations of the body. With a global sensing of the body, in and of itself, is a silent sensing, a silent world. The body feeling itself, making room for whatever degree of well-being, contentment, that might be here to support you. And then, in this body, is there any stability, steadiness, subtleness that you can call upon, or that you can rest in?

Where stability or steadiness—it's almost like a mood, a mood of settledness, a mood that welcomes a gathering in here in your ancestral homeland. Checking in with how you feel emotionally, your mood, your attitude. To recognize and allow and feel with your body. Maybe putting aside your beliefs and judgments about your experience, but feeling in your body how you are.

And then, in the gentlest way that you're capable, almost like you're coming in through the back door, gently with your awareness approach your thinking mind and gently touch it, gently see it. Recognize any thinking that's happening. Maybe not getting too close, but just gazing upon your thinking mind. Being rooted in that which can gaze, not being rooted in the thoughts themselves. Not to be troubled by your thoughts, if possible, but gently gaze upon them.

A gaze which is reassuring for any fear that's there in the thoughts, in awareness of thinking that somehow says, "It's okay. Don't worry. Nothing to figure out. Nothing to solve. Nothing you need to be entertained by." And after gazing upon thinking for a little while, finding your balance, finding your stability, there can be thinking without being caught in thinking. Then return to your breathing. Settle into the inner world that's deeper, lower than the world of thinking.

And with breathing, you can begin an appreciation of change—the changing nature of breathing in and breathing out. And if thinking is in the background, maybe it's okay to leave it alone. Stay with the breathing, the body. But if thinking is in the foreground, gently know it, feel it. Be mindful of thinking, but don't do it for longer than three to five breaths. After three or five breaths, reestablish yourself on your breathing.

Yes. Might there be a shifting change in your relationship to thinking that shifts your relationship to the present moment? Change in your body, a heightened sensitivity to movement and comings and goings, sensations. So you've done good work the first half of the retreat in

this cultivation side of it, and now we're going to be moving, especially with Kodo's talk this afternoon, into the insight part of it. But you've done a preparation, so you want to now really stay close to the practice, stay close to being able to kind of move along in what's possible here.

And one of the ways to stay close and to continue is to bring a sense of continuity in the practice throughout the day. That you're touching into the present moment, moment by moment, as you walk around the center, while you eat, while you're outside, as you walk down the stairs. Whatever you're doing, stay present. And I recommend that people conduct themselves, walk and other ways, be at the speed of mindfulness.

And what I mean by that is the personal speed for you by which you can stay present enough to notice when you get lost in thoughts, when you just kind of start drifting off in thought. See if you can stay present and intentional, deliberate with your steps, with your walking, with where you're going. That you'll notice when you start getting distracted. Like if you're going to get tea, like that's the intention: to walk through that community room to where the tea stand is.

And walk in such a way that you're present enough to notice whether you've looked at the shoe rack and begun wondering what shoes to get next. Oh, you know, if you end up having shoe thoughts all the way through until you finish your tea, then you're probably not going at the speed of mindfulness. It's very easy to pick up the speed of thinking and just kind of zip around and do things and be efficient, but that's a different speed. That's the speed of thinking, that ordinary life. What's the speed of presence? What's the speed of inhabiting the present moment with your whole being?

And so, rather than inhabiting your thoughts and having them in charge. So regardless, I hope you enjoy the day. It's a wonderful day for practice. Thank you.