# Guided Meditation: Insubstantiality of Thoughts

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So, hello and welcome. This week, the focus is on the five bundles, usually called the five aggregates, and today's is the fourth one. To introduce it, I want to say a few, maybe simple, things. Simple to say.

The first is that some scholars have tried to emphasize not calling our species *Homo sapiens*, but calling it *Homo storicus*: the humanoids that tell stories. Some scholars of religion have said that religions are more about their stories than about their beliefs. Stories galvanize people, and people relate to them, apply them, and are moved by them.

In some way, we have a story-making mind: a mind that tells stories about the past, not always accurately. Sometimes memories change and shift, and we get more information and realize the memory was wrong, or how we interpret it, how we read it. We understand there's more, and we tell stories about the future. If anxiety is different than fear, sometimes anxiety has to do with the predictions we have, the imagination we have about what's coming, what's going to happen. In that sense, it is a story, a narrative we make that danger is on its way.

So stories are very important, and I don't want to diminish the value of stories. It's how we get meaning. It's how we get a sense of purpose. It's how we make profound connections to other people, sharing our stories of our life and other things.

At the same time, stories are insubstantial. Stories are seldom the literal description of what happened or what's going to happen. And so, in the Buddhist tradition, in terms of these five bundles, stories—the story-making mind—are likened to a banana tree, a plantain tree. It looks like it has a trunk, but that particular kind of so-called tree has a trunk made up of leaves wrapped around very tightly, making an erect structure. But the center of the plantain trunk is hollow, and there's nothing there.


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And so stories have no core, no substantial center. They live in a kind of virtual world of the mind, and it's a creative mind. Sometimes stories tell truths better than prose or just descriptions of things, and myths do as well. But no matter what, there's something about how light they are, how they have no form, shape, or weight. They are a product of the mind that spins out the story, and they are less substantial than a spider's web, which is maybe up for an hour or so and then disappears.

And so, one of the things we're learning to do in meditation, especially mindfulness meditation, is not be addicted to, caught in, or preoccupied with the story-making mind. It has its place. It has a wonderful place in life, and so it is not to be dismissed. However, in meditation, it becomes clear that the story-making mind takes us away from our direct experience. It somehow brings us into the web of concepts and ideas. It gets our mind kind of caught in ideas.

Not a few stories in the mind have ourselves as the important character that keeps us kind of hooked to the story. There are stories of grandeur, stories of failure, stories of danger, stories of wonderful fantasies. And stories can serve a lot of purposes, some of which are not so healthy for us.

So, with that long introduction, the idea is to support being present here in a deep, peaceful way by understanding, by seeing the insubstantial nature of the story-making mind, so we don't get pulled into it. So we let it recede to the background, or let it quiet down, in favor of a kind of deep peace and intimacy and sense of at-homeness that cannot happen as long as we are telling stories.

So, assume a meditation posture and gently close the eyes. And if we relate to our body from the story-making mind, that adds value and meaning and fantasies to our body from the outside in, we're not that deeply connected. Feel the body from the inside out, feeling the body on its own terms. That means feeling the body simply as sensations that appear.

And let your attention roam around the body to feel the flow of sensations. Some are very broad, global, like a gentle hum or sense of vitality. Some are more specific: the tingling and vibration and pulsing that might be in the fingers or the hand. Some are specific: the movements in your chest or your belly as you breathe in and out.

As you exhale, relax the body. Soften, relaxing the body from the outside in: the shoulders, the belly, the chest. And feel your body and relax your body from the inside out. Maybe there is a place deep within that is a reference point for calm, peace, or stability. As you exhale, relax around that place. Relax into it.


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Also, take a few moments to feel the sensations of your thinking mind. If there's any tension, tightness, pressure, or agitation, feel the sensations associated with your thinking mind. And can you feel those sensations without making a story about them? Without preferences and wanting and not wanting, just feel as it is. Maybe feel them more carefully as you breathe in, and relax the thinking mind as you exhale. Gently, slowly, on the exhale, relax the thinking mind, and relax all the way back down to the quiet place within.

And if you begin having discursive thoughts, story-making thoughts about the past, the future, events, fantasies, remember that they're empty, like a banana tree. Remember that they're insubstantial. Recognize how they have no weight, shape, or color, except for that which is given to them by the tension of the thinking mind, the tension which is not the stories themselves.

The light of awareness is what clears the fog of the story-making mind, so you can be more clearly present for the sensations of breathing, bringing you home to a deeper connection within. If you're involved in your thinking mind, you could let go of it, or you can see its insubstantial nature. See it as being empty at its core: no weight, no color, no shape, so that those thoughts can evaporate into the space and stillness around you.

Relaxing as you exhale, settle back as if you're going to settle into a nice, easy chair, a recliner from which you can watch or listen to someone telling stories. But they're not so interesting. You don't get pulled into them, but you see them as something that's made up in that moment, with no substance to them.

So, in that way, settle back and don't be in your thinking mind. But settle back and listen to it or watch it from a distance, almost as if it's someone else you're watching or listening to. Then see it for what it is: a kind of spinning of tales, ideas, predictions, futures, and pasts. They have a similar emptiness as the space around you, insubstantial.

And then, as if that story mind, storyteller, is finished and sits down and moves to the side. And now, from your easy chair gazing out, you can see the world, see others without the filter of a story, see people without prejudice and bias, without past and future. See others as living people, for whom you can now send unobstructed your goodwill, your kindness, to bring a soft sensitivity. That disinclines you to have any hostility, any disrespect, to gaze upon others kindly, because it's the nature of the deep mind to be free of hostility, to be filled with goodwill.

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> May all beings be happy.  May all beings be safe.  May all beings be peaceful.  May all beings be free.

Thank you.


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