Thoughts Think Themselves

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Okay. So, I'd like to continue on this series of *When Life Doesn't Obey Us*. This is the third talk which, as I mentioned in the guided meditation, I'm titling *Thoughts Think Themselves*. Just, I don't know, I like this title, I think it's kind of fun, and it's also pointing to a theme of when life doesn't obey us because the truth is life never obeys us. Like, things arise and things happen that make us happy or what we want. But it's not because we're out there controlling everything, making things happen exactly the way we want. It doesn't mean we don't try. I know I certainly have spent plenty of time in my life trying to make everything just right.

So, in this series, we've been exploring the many ways life doesn't obey us. Comfort comes and goes. The body changes. Doesn't mean we can't care for it, but the body is not under our control. It's changing. And in this third one, we're turning towards thoughts. And we may not say it out loud, and I know I certainly didn't say it out loud, but I used to have this idea that meditation, and perhaps maybe even my life, I don't know, was about controlling my thoughts. I had this idea that's what's supposed to happen here. I should be able to stop worrying or stop planning in a way that's not helpful, or stop judging things or other people. I should be able to quiet the mind on command. I should be able to only think wise thoughts, only think kind thoughts, peaceful thoughts.

And there's this way that when the mind doesn't cooperate, when we aren't having those wise, kind thoughts, we might think that somehow we're failing, that somehow we're not spiritual enough. Or we might think like, what is wrong with me? Like look at these thoughts. Oh my goodness. I hope no one else knows about them.

But one of the great discoveries of practice is thoughts arise, thoughts pass away, and we don't control them. And as I offered in this guided meditation, a simple experiment could be: okay, what is your next thought? I'll wait. What is your next thought? Maybe it's the thought, what is she talking about? But the important thing to notice is you didn't choose it. You didn't make it happen. You didn't manufacture it from scratch. It appeared. And this is a doorway into this insight that we don't have to believe a doctrine. We don't have to adopt a philosophy. We just look. The next thought arrives. The same way a sound arrives. It just arrives. Same way weather arrives, dependent on conditions.

Because if that little experiment didn't help you get this insight, then perhaps this idea will help make it more clear that if we indeed controlled our thoughts, we would choose better ones, wouldn't we? When we find ourselves awake at 3:00 a.m., we probably would stop the worrying

or planning thoughts and choose soft, gentle, sleepy thoughts. Or when we find ourselves irritated and maybe we want to say or are about to say something unhelpful, then we would choose kind thoughts, useful thoughts, or clear thoughts, or forgiving thoughts, right? We would choose these thoughts if we could, but we can't.

We're not controlling them. We're not the commanding ruler of the mind. We're not sitting behind the scenes issuing every thought. Of course not. Thoughts arise because of conditions, because of what happened yesterday, because of what happened when we were young, because of what we are afraid of, because of what we long for, because of what we have practiced repeatedly, because of what the nervous system is carrying, because of what the body is experiencing, because of what the heart has not yet digested. These are all the conditions for thoughts.

We could say that the main suffering are not thoughts themselves but our identification with it. I mean to be sure some thoughts cause suffering, but there's this way that it's not only that they arise. I mean that's human, but it gets intensified when we have this additional thought that says this thought is me. It says something about me. It's mine. This one's the truth. And because this thought has appeared, I must do something about it. Or maybe because this thought has appeared, there's this tremendous amount of shame that arises. Something is wrong.

Maybe a worried thought arises. And this idea that, well, what if this goes badly? And then suddenly we are inside a whole movie about projecting what going badly might look like or be experienced as. Or maybe a judgmental thought arises and they shouldn't have done that, and suddenly maybe there's this way in which the body tightens, the heart closes, and the argument begins. And then off that goes.

So practice invites a shift. A shift from being the thought, lost in the worry, lost in the judgment to just knowing it. This shift from obeying the thought, believing it to recognizing thinking is happening, thinking is happening. This shift from being lost to recognizing thinking is happening.

So meditation is not about controlling our thoughts but about changing our relationship to them. And I know that when I started my meditation practice, I definitely thought it was about controlling thoughts in some kind of way, and I felt frustrated and thought that I was a terrible meditator because I couldn't control my thoughts. But that's not what meditation is about. It's not a thought control project. It's more about: can we notice the thought? Can we allow it to be there? Can we let it be known? Can we feel how it affects us? Feel it in the body and trust we don't have to fix it right then or do anything about it right then. Just maybe let it pass. Maybe it's helpful. We can name planning or worrying or remembering or judging. And this naming isn't meant to shame the mind, but it's more like, oh yeah, this is what's happening.

So this points to something really, really important, that thoughts are conditioned. They're not personal failures. When worry arises, it doesn't mean I'm a worried person. I'm failing. I'm spiritually immature[1]. It means the mind is trying to protect. The nervous system is activated in some kind of way. Uncertainty is present. Something tender wants attention. That's all. Doesn't mean that we are personal failures. It doesn't mean this long list about ourselves.

And then this idea of seeing thoughts as conditioned doesn't excuse harmful actions. Understanding that thoughts are conditioned, they're arising out of causes and conditions, we're not controlling them. Doesn't mean you can say whatever you want. It doesn't mean you can act out any thoughts because they're conditioned. It doesn't mean that because it's conditioning, nothing matters. That would be a misunderstanding.

The practice is not to pretend that thoughts never happen. And the practice is not to collapse into shame because they do happen. The practice is to recognize thoughts arise because of conditions. And this thought doesn't have to become speech. This thought doesn't have to become action. This thought does not have to become who I am.

And this is where the teaching becomes, we could say, both compassionate and ethical. It's compassionate because we don't have to add this extra suffering of self-blame. "I'm a terrible person because I have this thought. I'm a terrible meditator because I'm having thoughts. I shouldn't be having this thought. A good practitioner wouldn't have this thought."

And this teaching also becomes ethical because what happens next still matters. If mindfulness arises, that changes the conditions for the next thoughts. If restraint arises, that changes the conditions for the next thought. If care arises, that changes the conditions for the next thought. If remorse and repair after harm has been done arises, that also changes the conditions.

So this teaching doesn't say I am in control of everything, and it does not say therefore nothing matters. But there's this way in which when thoughts are seen as conditioned, there's more room, more room to be honest, more room to be humble, more room to learn, and room for the next moment to unfold. And this is a tender form of accountability. Not accountability that's based on shame. Not accountability that's based on the fantasy that we should have a perfectly pure mind. It's not a form of accountability that's based on the idea that there is a separate self in charge of the whole process, but accountability as care. Care for causes and conditions.

So seeing thoughts as conditioned, we could say, allows two things to be true at the same time. We don't control our thoughts. And how thoughts are met still matters. This is a middle way. Not self-blame, not self-excuse. But compassionate participation in causes and conditions.

So saying thoughts think themselves does not mean nothing matters. It does not mean that every mental habit has to simply run its course. It doesn't mean that harmful speech or action is irrelevant. But it also does not mean I am the one who controls. I can decide from outside the

stream of causes and conditions what the next thought will be. It doesn't mean that if I practice correctly, I'll finally be in charge. Conditions matter and thoughts think themselves. We don't control them.

And this is a way in which life doesn't obey us. There's freedom here to notice the conditions and to stop thinking that somehow we're separate from this flow of conditions. That there's this entity that's separate over here. Doesn't work that way. Of course not. Thoughts think themselves.

Thank you. Thank you for your practice.

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Additional transcripts and links to YouTube videos at Moonpointing.com with deep bows of appreciation to Dan Murphy.

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