Thursday Morning Guided Meditation: Thinking

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It's a remarkable, revolutionary thing to step away from thinking and to look thinking right in the eye and say, ”I see you. You're a thought.” And the reason why it's revolutionary is that human life, human societies, human cultures all have a foundation in ideas and thoughts and thinking that someone had, maybe you. And to have a new relationship to thinking, where we don't automatically believe it, we don't get pushed around by it, we don't jump into it, we don't build thought upon thought, is something very few people do.

To look at thinking: ”I see you. That's a thought.” And to do so not adding one more thought and a sense of one more thinking on top of thinking, but almost to create more space and freedom, more ease and peace. Seeing it peacefully, seeing it peacefully, not being horrified by our thoughts, and not being delighted in our thoughts, not accepting our thoughts, and not rejecting our thoughts is a phenomenal thing to do.

And it's phenomenally difficult to understand what I'm saying because we're so embedded, enmeshed in thought-thinking. We hardly know that we're thinking, and thinking is a very odd thing. On one hand, it has no substance; it has no weight; it has no shape; it has no solidity. On the other hand, it can be treated as the most substantial thing in the world, as the heaviest, most important, most solid thing. And the contrast between what we invest into it and what it actually is is a huge contrast.

And one way to maybe begin seeing this is that there's a difference between thinking and a new English word: the difference between thinking and thoughting. Thoughting is what the mind does. Thoughting is a simple idea, one little idea that comes, floats up, that's there. Thinking is a chain of associations, a cascading momentum of how one thought leads to the next thought, to the next thought, the next association, the next assigning of meaning, the next prediction, the next belief, next opinion, the next story.

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And in that thinking, we know the famous saying: ”I think, therefore I am.” The Buddhist way of saying it is: ”I think, and that is where I am.” That's the location where we take our residence. That's kind of—we're so much in the thinking most of the time. It's as if that is who we are, and so of course the thinking is important and solid.

So, sitting quietly, and taking a little bit of time to, as silently as you can, check into your body. And those of you in the outer room, the door to the meditation hall is being closed because the alarm company is coming to do technical work now. So if there's an alarm that goes off, don't be alarmed.

So, a silent checking into your body—what has shifted, even from what I just said, in your body? How are your hands today? Are they just hands, or do they carry a little tension? Do they carry any emotions? Are they positioned right for you?

How are your arms? What was it like to not think about your arms, but to feel them silently, to offer a kind of intimacy from the inside out to arms? How are your shoulders? Are they the home of tension, tightness? If so, it's okay.

Maybe you don't have to make any stories about it or any judgments about it. Just, this is how they are. Any emotions connected to the shoulders? And if so, that's okay.

How's your upper torso? And what would it be like to simply discover how it is, feel from the inside, while allowing it to be just the way it is? As if your heart and upper torso have been in the dark for a long time, and now, finally, they're in the sun of awareness, where they're allowed to be as they are, but known, known and felt in that light.

Checking in with your belly. How are things in the belly? Sometimes the home for emotions. Maybe let it be a home for emotion, where it's welcome to be there. Maybe, if it's safe to be home in your belly, allow your belly to be a safe place for tension, for fear, for whatever is there.

And part of your body is the head. Checking in with your head. Is there a way of checking in and noticing your head that's radically new? That has nothing to do with what you look like in your face or your hair, but how the head kind of radiates sensations from the inside out.

Maybe they're very subtle. Maybe they're not subtle. But allowing the head to be the home for whatever sensations there are, comfortable or uncomfortable. Allowing the head to be the home for whatever emotions might be associated with the face, the brain, the temples. And if that is where your thinking occurs, in your head, maybe allow the head to be home for that.

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For now, no need to reject your thinking. No need to accept it. No need to avoid thinking. No need to be involved with thinking. Thoughts arise.

Chances are, if you think in words, you're not repeating a single word over and over and over again. You're probably more creative than that. But each word, each sentence, is its own thought that has a beginning, and somehow ends before the next thought. Your thinking can be quite solid and serious and important. It can be infused with emotion and fear and desires and aversions. It's okay.

The task is to know that that's the case, just to know. Thinking, I see you. And if you clearly see thinking, know that this is thinking, then you are not in that thought. If you recognize there's a thought, that thought is not you. If the thought is you, you would disappear when the thought stops.

And this funny thing about thoughts and images, ideas: they are surrounded by that which is not thoughts, by a kind of spaciousness, space. That which is silent from thinking. And to see thinking with an awareness that's wide enough to recognize thinking occurring within this sky-like mind, this space-like world that we're in.

And as you think, if it's discursive thinking, recognize that that's the case, where the recognition is kind of like, ”I see you, discursive thinking. I know you. I am not you. You are just thoughts, and I can see you.” And I'll stay close to the seeing, close to the knowing.

If your thoughts are simple thoughts of recognition, what's happening here and now? With the support of the space around thinking, allow that thought of recognition to be very simple—a thought that doesn't become thinking about it. For the purposes of mindfulness, what you're thinking about is much less important than how you're thinking. Is there tension in thinking, or pressure in thinking? Contraction.

Does your world get small when you're lost in thought? If there's tightness, pressure around thinking, if you feel that tension, pressure carefully, maybe you'll feel how it wants to relax. It wants to soften. Maybe something about thinking wants itself to let go of thinking. Something doesn't want to be so intense, or holding on, or searching, or wanting, judging.

Something in those very things is requesting: let go, let loose, let be—all the things you're concerned with. And now, to switch gears, imagine your awareness as a small, light, flat stone that you gently drop into a clear pool of water, and it gradually settles down, down, and rests in the bottom of the lake, the pool. Let your awareness drop from your head, from your thinking, down, down, in your body, resting.

And where you feel your breathing, there might be very simple thoughts about breathing.

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Thoughts of recognition. Thoughts giving yourself instruction that lovingly keeps you there, feeling your breath, being with your breath. Or being simply aware of breathing.

Simple thoughts that point to being aware of breathing feel better than wandering off in discursive thought. Cough. Maybe your thinking mind can be allowed to rest, letting thinkings recede to the background, so that in the foreground there's a direct, actual experience here and now of your body, of your direct experience.

That can be known without thoughts, maybe a nonverbal knowing, a nonverbal knowing that is peaceful, unhurried. That is part of being awake, being aware. Beyond the edges of thinking, there is space and peace. There's a wider field of goodness. Goodness.

A wider field of where there's no clinging to anything. For whatever you're holding on to, there's a lot more you're not holding onto. Allow the awareness, allow your sense of being, to be larger than whatever you're holding on to, whatever you're concerned about, so that what you're holding on to feels safe, safe enough to let go.

So this approach to mindfulness is not meant to disrespect the thinking mind. Thinking has a place in life, but it doesn't have to be the center of life—not all the time. And the opportunity on a retreat is to put the body at the center, the sensing body, the body that's aware and embodied with sensations.

To put a kind of silent awareness at the center, where thinking might be at the periphery, it might be in the background, where you don't have to concern yourself with it much. Just that you're thinking something doesn't mean that it's important. Just that you're thinking about something doesn't mean you have to do it now.

Part of the problem with thinking, when it's at the center, is that it keeps us alienated from the wholeness of who we are—the whole. And the movement of mindfulness is to move into that wholeness. An awareness that has space and room to know breathing, know body sensations, know emotions, and know the mind. That knows the mind that knows, that thinks, that instructs.

And as we become whole, and thinking doesn't divide us anymore, doesn't separate us or limit us, thinking can become profound and deep. It can be supportive and can be part of the love affair with life, that we think deeply in a way that doesn't distract us, doesn't divide us. We don't lose ourselves in it. But the opposite: we gain ourselves.

And so finally, to say something about thinking—that's wise, wise thinking. There is thinking that points beyond thinking. Even just saying to yourself, ”What is beyond thinking?” I mean, that's a thought, right? But it's pointing to what's beyond it. What's deeper than thinking?

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How can I be aware right now without thinking? Who am I when I don't use thoughts to answer the question? So as you settle and get deeper and more whole, you might find that there's a wonderful way of thinking that points us into the practice, keeps us right here, and even points beyond itself. So we're not stuck in thinking.

As you go about the center today and practicing, you might see, from time to time, you can walk and eat and go to your room and do the things that you do with enough presence, maybe with enough slowness, so you don't unconsciously drift off in thought. That you're right there to catch the beginning of thinking and use that as a reminder: stay right here. And over time, I hope you and your thinking become good friends, supporting each other.

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