

The Reality of Your Thoughts

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There's that piece by John Cage, *4' 33"*, where the pianist sits at the piano and doesn't play anything at all. And as you listen, you realize that even though the piano's quiet, the room is *not* quiet. The whole point of the piece is to point that out, to remind you how much ambient noise there is all around you, all the time.

The same principle applies to the meditation. You don't really notice the ambient noise in your mind until you try to make it still, try to keep it quiet, be with the breath. Then you begin to realize your mind is a random thought-generator: All these neurons firing and little thoughts appearing here and appear there, and there's part of the mind that's always trying to make sense out of these things. We've gotten pretty good at creating little thought-worlds—so good at it that we tend to forget that we're in this process of creating all the time, and we often take our thoughts-creations for reality.

There was a famous philosopher who wrote two books on language. In one book he assumed that language was an adequate picture of reality—i.e. that our thoughts, if they're expressed as language, would be an adequate picture of reality—and he built up a whole philosophical structure based on that idea. And then, years later, he wrote another book in which language was totally arbitrary, it was just language games, words pointing to other words, with no real relationship to reality at all.

Of course somebody pointed out the fact, "Well, wait a minute, we have thoughts about pain, we have thoughts about other things that are hard realities." And the truth about thinking is somewhere in between: It's not the case that it's a totally adequate picture of reality. Your thoughts are like cartoon pictures. This is why cartoons are so effective: They're very close to the way we actually think, but they don't give a total picture of reality; yet at the same time they're not totally arbitrary. They bear some resemblance to reality, or to the way things are.

So the question is: What do you do? How much credence do you give to these thoughts? And the best approach is to look at the thoughts in terms of what they *do*. What do they accomplish? What does this particular line of thinking accomplish? Some thoughts are adequate enough to be useful in some circumstances but not in others. So that leads to the next question: What do you want to accomplish?

This is where the Buddha's teachings come in. He said that it is possible to accomplish an end to suffering, and you want to use your thoughts toward that end. Any thinking that helps toward that end is useful thinking; any other thinking that gets in the way of that goal is something you want to learn how to put aside.

He made a distinction between two types of thinking: There's the normal, general term he uses for thinking, *vitakka*, and then there's another term, *papañca*, which is probably best translated as "objectification," where you start giving reality to your thoughts; when you think about things existing out there; or things *not* existing out there or in here, and

give them reality. That's when your concepts take over. They take on a life of their own. It's no longer a question of how useful they are. They become things in and of themselves. And that kind of thinking, the Buddha says, stirs up a lot of trouble—in fact, it's the kind of thinking that leads to conflict, both with other people and within yourself.

In some contexts, he said that *all* thinking is a type of objectification; but in other contexts he separates them out—that it is possible to think in other ways. And for the purpose of the practice, separating them out is actually a useful concept, at least where we are in the practice right now. There will come a point where we want to go beyond all thinking, but for the time being we haven't reached that point yet, so what we have to do is learn how to *use* our thinking to undercut unskillful thinking, to undercut unskillful emotions that go along with our thoughts, learning how to look at them as processes.

This is what the Buddha's teachings on dependent co-arising are all about. It's one of those topics that tend to get very abstract and very complicated, but it doesn't have to be. In fact, you can learn how to apply it in a way that's very direct: You look at your thoughts as processes and then ask yourself, "Where does this process lead? What does it accomplish?" And then, looking at these things as processes, you have to step back and ask, "How much reality is there to these things?"

It's often useful also to remind yourself that there's a lot out there in reality that your thoughts don't capture—your thoughts are sketches, often very quick sketches—and it's good to remind yourself of this fact when a thought begins to take over the mind, causes suffering, causes unskillful behavior, because we just stamp too much reality on the things we think.

At that point it's useful to remind yourself that your thoughts really don't capture everything that's out there, and they're the product of this random thought-generator. We're very busily stitching together something that makes sense out of these random thoughts, but to what extent is our stitching really helpful? And to what extent could we stitch together all sorts of weird stuff?

This is one of the reasons why we stay with the breath, because the breath allows us to step back a little bit from the thinking process and see it just as that—as a thinking process.

This stance is useful in dealing not only with thoughts, but also with emotions. Emotions often seem to have more reality; in fact, we tend to identify with them even more than just thoughts that go in and out of the mind with neutral feeling-tones. The ones that really stir-up a lot of greed, aversion, delusion, fear, jealousy, grief: They seem real because they have such a lasting impact in the body. But the Buddha has you regard these, as well, as processes. And again the question is: Where do these things *lead*?

Most of us never think about them in those terms. As with grief: We don't think of grief *leading* anywhere—it's just there, this huge presence in our hearts. Or fear. But here the Buddha's pointing out that these are things that we can pursue or *not* pursue. There are so many things going on in the mind at any one time, so many possible emotions, that we actually have a choice in what we pursue and what we don't. Sometimes he says grief is

worth pursuing, and other forms of grief are not, to remind you that you do play an active role in the present in fabricating these things.

So, when you express your grief so that you can *understand* it, that's actually serving a purpose; but there comes a point when it becomes just self-indulgent, and it's useful to learn how to see it that way—again as a process that can serve a purpose, but once it's served its purpose, you've got to get beyond it.

Here again, it's useful to remind yourself that the grief is not any more real than any other thought. This is where the Buddha's teachings on fabrication are useful. He says we fabricate our emotions in three ways: through physical fabrication, i.e., the breath; verbal fabrication, the thoughts and evaluations we make of a particular situation; and then mental fabrications, which are feelings and perceptions. The feelings here are feeling-tones: pleasure, pain, and neither-pleasure-nor-pain. As for perceptions, those are the labels we apply to things, the labels we apply to people; and it's these labels that tend to get objectified. We have to watch out for that.

But an emotion is more than just the thoughts. There's a physical side that can be very intense when all those hormones have gotten churned up. That's where the breath comes in handy as a physical fabrication. You can monitor the way you're breathing and you can have an impact on the way you're breathing. When things get really worked up in the body, you can ask yourself: To what extent is the way you breathe aggravating the problem, and to what extent could it be changed to help relieve the problem?

So when we're working here with the breath—coming in; going out; learning how to be sensitive to the breath-energy in the different parts of the body; calming it; soothing it; combing out all of its tangles—that's a useful skill, not only while we're sitting here meditating, but also when any emotion comes up. It gives you a place to stand, to look at the emotion: Is this an emotion you want to pursue, or is it one that you want to let go of? If you think of the emotions as waves washing over you, the breath keeps you anchored in the body, so that you don't get washed away. It keeps you anchored right here.

And you realize you have the choice—do you want to go off into that emotional world or can you have at least a foothold here in the sense of the body in the present moment where you can watch the emotion come and go, watch the thought come and go. You'll find that every emotion will have a thought associated with it, or a cluster of thoughts. And if you have a good, solid place to stand—at least a calm place to breathe in and breathe out—you can begin to look at the perceptions: What are the perceptions that underlie that particular emotion? What are the ways of thinking and evaluating? Are they useful or are they not? What are they accomplishing?

And again, if you can keep reminding yourself that even the emotion is only just a *sketch* of reality, it helps you loosen up your attachments to the particular details that you tend to focus on. From one perspective they may be true, but from other perspectives they're totally irrelevant, or they're very loose renderings of what's going on. So, if there's a particular detail that really aggravates the emotion, you can put a question mark next to it: Is this helpful? Is it not? Is it worth pursuing or is it not?

When you can learn how to look at these things as processes and as fabrications, you see that they're not necessarily more real or less real than anything else. So the question is: Are they more or less worth pursuing? *That's* the real question. This pulls you out of the objectification and into just the process: the arising and passing away of thoughts.

That's what dependent co-arising is all about: seeing things as processes and events, to pull you out of the categories of objectification and to remind you that all thinking is very artificial. All your emotions are artificial. Some of us don't like to hear that. It's okay that our thoughts might be artificial, but our emotions have to be real, because if we didn't have the reality of our emotions, who would we be and where would we be? That's our attitude.

And the Buddha's answer to that attitude is that you could be in a much better place if you don't keep giving reality to your emotions. If you loosen up your grip around your idea that these things have to be real, it offers a lot of opportunity for the mind to be a lot more free. It doesn't have to suffer from these things.

For the Buddha, this is what thinking is all about, this is what *useful* thinking accomplishes: It helps to free you from the tyranny of the mind's insistence, "Well, this has to be true, and that has to be real, and I'm trapped by this obstacle, and trapped by that obstacle." Even though the pain that comes from these things *is* a reality, it doesn't have to be there all the time. You're actively creating that particular reality. And when you see that it is a creation, and that it's not necessary, *that's* when you can begin to let go.

So it's not totally a dream-world that we're in, and it's not totally a language game. There's that story of the article that appeared in a postmodern journal one time, written with all the appropriate postmodern vocabulary, talking about gravity as a social construct. The editors were fooled. They thought this was a serious article and they printed it. Then the author told them, "Wait a minute, if you think gravity's a social construct, go to the edge of a balcony and jump off." The editors were not amused, which tells you a lot about postmodern journals.

So there is some reality to our thoughts, but remember: Not every thought is about the law of gravity, not every emotion is about the law of gravity. A lot of things are details that we've latched on to and we've stitched them together in a connect-the-dots kind of way. We forget where the dots were, and we pay more attention to the lines or the threads that we use to connect them. But as the Buddha said, the seamstress here is craving, and how much can you trust your craving? If it's blind craving, then the seamstress is blind and just sews whatever together, and you end up with all kinds of weird costumes.

But you can educate your craving. Make it a craving to be free. And part of the education is realizing that there's a lot in your thinking that's pretty arbitrary. It's one picture of reality, but there are many different ways that you could picture reality that would be a lot more useful. And the best way to judge thinking is to ask, "Where does it lead? What kind of thinking is helpful, what kind of thinking is harmful? What kind of thinking creates more suffering and stress, and what kind of thinking relieves suffering and stress—*totally*." When you pose those questions and look at your thoughts and emotions as processes—fabrications, creations—that right there is a type of thinking that leads in the

right direction. And focusing here on the breath puts you in a position where you can think from that perspective.

So even though there are some constraints on what we could possibly think and possibly do at any one time, those constraints don't prevent us from doing what's *skillful*. So always try to look for that: What's the skillful way of dealing with this? A particular thought or a particular emotion comes up: "Is this worth pursuing or is this worth undercutting?" When you can see it as a *process*, you not only can pose that question but you can also give the right answer and you can follow up on that answer—you can actually *do* the pursuing or do the undercutting, whatever's called for.

There's a lot of freedom right there. It's in realizing that we have freedom of choice: That's the first step in finding the ultimate freedom that can be uncovered as you learn to untangle all the processes with which you've tangled yourself to begin with. Like those wires on the headset here. If you see the knot just as a big *thing*, it's hard to untangle it; but if you see there are threads connecting, you can pull out the threads, and the problem's gone.