

# *Nuclear Thinking*

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Thoughts come and go, but we keep trying to make them stay. In fact we've gotten pretty good at making them stay. Without that habit, we wouldn't be able to speak, to hold conversations, to think anything through. So this habit has its uses, but also its drawbacks. It can weigh us down with all kinds of suffering, all kinds of stress when the mind goes overboard in its thinking.

The skill in meditation is learning how to think when you want to, how not to think when you don't. It's not a process of putting yourself into a totally blank state where no thinking is ever possible. At the same time, it's not a process of ceaseless thinking. It means learning the right time and the place for your thoughts.

The problem is that the mind keeps churning out thoughts at the wrong time and the wrong place – thoughts you don't want, but they still come in. Sometimes it seems that the less you want them, the more insistent they are in coming. This shows that you've left an opening for them. But before you can see this opening to find exactly what you're doing that admits those thoughts, that's fascinated by them, you have to get the mind as quiet as you can. This is why, in the process of meditation, there's a rhythm between periods when you want to keep the mind as quiet as possible, and others when you want to investigate and explore. There's a rhythm to the practice. And the mind has its own rhythms, too. Sometime it seems like nothing is going on in the mind; at other times there seems to be nothing but disturbance. The skill in the practice lies in learning how to make use of whatever level of concentration you've got to deal with wherever you are in the rhythm of the mind. In periods when the thoughts seem to be few and far between, you can't let yourself be complacent. Build up your concentration as solidly as you can so that, when the next wave of really obsessive thinking washes over the mind, you'll have stronger tools for dealing with it, stronger tools for not getting swept away.

When thoughts come in, remind yourself that there's always a part of the mind that's not involved in the thinking. This is easier to realize when you've been working on developing a large frame of reference for your concentration. Once the breath gets comfortable, immediately expand it and let that comfortable sensation spread to other parts of the body. Get used to having this enlarged frame, for otherwise, if your mind is totally one-pointed, focused on being aware of only one little point of the body, it gets easily knocked over. One thought can come in and totally overwhelm that one little point without much effort at all. You suddenly find yourself with your concentration destroyed, and your mind splashing all over the place.

But if your area of awareness has a broader base – all the way from the feet up to the head, all around the body – and if you think of your awareness as a porous space, then when the thoughts come and go there's space for them to go through without running into anything. They just go out the other side. That way your concentration doesn't get knocked over by the thoughts, both because it's large and because it doesn't put up a surface of resistance. You could put up that surface if you want, and sometimes it's wise to, but sometimes it seems to make the thoughts more obstreperous. So if you have to let them in, okay let them in, but then just let them go.

Think of the body as a large field of energy. There's nothing solid there. A thought comes in and has nothing to run against, so it runs out the other side. This way you begin to realize that there's nothing you necessarily have to fear about thinking. You have the choice of focusing on your thoughts, or not, whichever you want. When you realize that you always have another place to focus, you can have control over your thinking. You just switch back to that mode of that enlarged awareness and stay, leaving the thoughts to pass away on their own.

Now don't think that that enlarged awareness is the Buddha's unconditioned. It's more like his reference to the word "*dhatu*," which means property. Back in the Buddha's time they talked about the different properties that make up the body, different properties found in the mind. The basic idea behind the concept of *dhatu* or property is closer to our word, "potential." There's a potential that gives rise to things when it gets aggravated, disturbed, or provoked. When there's no provocation, everything stays very still. This is how they explained fire. They said that the fire potential lies latent in everything. If you stir it up with a little friction from a fire stick – or nowadays with a match – that aggravates the fire potential and it bursts into flame. But even when it's not aggravated, the potential is still there.

The mind is like that. There's a potential for thinking in every little cell of the body, it seems. In every little speck of your awareness there's the potential for a thought to arise if it gets provoked. When things are still and empty in the mind, it's simply because nothing's been provoked. It doesn't mean that there's no possibility of new things' coming out. It's just that they haven't been aggravated. Sometimes there's a strong sense of light that goes along with the stillness and, again, that's not the light of the unconditioned. It's the light of these potentials, their energy, just waiting to be provoked.

So even when nothing seems to be going on in the mind, don't get complacent. Keep trying to develop your concentration even further. Develop this sense of space so that you're really proficient at it, so that you can maintain it all the time. Develop a 360-degree sense of awareness so that when something *does* get provoked, you're quick to see it. Part of you will say "Oh, I thought there was nothing there," but the potential for disturbance has been there all along.

It's like children in a classroom – at least back in the old days, when teachers had some authority. As long as the teacher was in the classroom, the kids were quiet. They'd wait until the teacher left the room before they'd start running around. If the teacher came back in, they'd sit down and get quiet again.

My older brother tells a story from when he was in grade school. He had a really sharp teacher, Mrs. Lane. One day she left the classroom and went downstairs to the restroom to have a smoke. The kids, of course, started running around the classroom until they heard her coming back up the stairs. Everybody then sat down very quietly – except for my brother, who was so excited that he continued running around. So, of course, he got caught. Later, after the class, Mrs. Lane took him aside and said, "Look, Galen. You've got to learn how to be sneaky. Listen for when I come up the stairs and then stop running around." She was a sharp teacher. Even though she was downstairs in the restroom, she knew what was going on upstairs. But she was also wise. The way she spoke to him gave my brother the feeling that she was on his side. She knew he wanted to have some fun and she was showing him how to do it in a harmless way.

Mindfulness and alertness are like teachers of the mind, and you've got to train them to be sharp and wise. When alert mindfulness fills the body, fills your awareness, then your random thoughts get very quiet. But your thoughts are sneaky. As soon as mindfulness slips a little bit, a new thought forms in the corner. Then it spreads out to fill up all the areas abandoned by your mindful awareness. But if you can re-establish that larger frame, that larger field of awareness, the thought can go through the field and not do any damage. It can do its thing, but it won't knock over the frame. But this means that you've got to be very alert, very non-complacent. And that requires work.

Then again, that's what concentration is: It's work. But at least it's pleasant work, work in the right direction, giving us a frame of reference from which we can look at our thoughts with more detachment, with less involvement, less identification. This doesn't mean that there's no sense of identification at all, though. Actually, you've just switched your identification. Instead of identifying with the thoughts, you identify with that larger frame, that larger field of brightened awareness. No matter how much you contemplate the teachings on not-self, the process of identification doesn't end all at once. It moves from things that are blatant and obvious to things more subtle and refined. Only when you've pared it down consistently to the refined level can you let it go entirely. The important point at the beginning is that you learn how to use it so that you don't latch on to things that are blatantly harmful: thoughts that pull you off into greed, anger, and delusion, thoughts that stir up any of the unskillful potentials in your mind.

So this particular step in the meditation – once the breath gets comfortable, start spreading your awareness to fill the whole body and then allow that comfortable breath to fill the whole body as well – is an extremely important part of the meditation. In the Buddha's 16 steps for breath meditation, step number

three is just this step: You train yourself to breathe in and out sensitive to the entire body. The Buddha puts this step right up there toward the beginning because it's so fundamental. When he talks about a mind in concentration, he calls it *mahagattam cittam* – enlarged awareness.

The images he gives for the states of right concentration are all images of enlargement. When you're first allowing that sense of ease and pleasure to permeate the body, he says it's like a bathman or a bathman's apprentice, who would knead water through a ball of bath powder. Back in those days, they didn't have soap; they had a powder, like flour, to bathe with. They'd make a dough out of the powder by kneading water into it until no part of the ball of dough was dry, and yet the water wouldn't ooze or drip out. This is the stage of working the initial sense of ease and pleasure throughout your whole body.

In the second and third levels of jhana there's a similar process but with less effort. You let the pleasure or rapture corresponding to that state permeate, pervade your whole awareness, suffuse your whole body. The image given by the Buddha is of a spring of cool water welling up from the bottom of a lake, permeating the entire lake. As for the third jhana, which is more quiet and less of an intensely rapturous state, he said that it's like lotuses submerged in a still lake, permeated entirely by the water of the lake from their roots to the tips of their buds. With the fourth jhana, the image is of a person with a bright cloth covering the whole body, the same way your bright awareness fills the whole body.

So it's obvious from these images that jhana is a state of broadened awareness. And this broadened awareness is really important. For one thing, it gives you a firm basis so that you don't get knocked over by distracting thoughts. At the same time, it allows your vision to become more all-around, 360 degrees all-around, so that you're aware of all the little potentials in the body, all the little potentials in the mind that can get provoked in one way or another.

That way you can be quicker and quicker to see the very early stages of provocation. When the slightest stirring comes, you'll notice it. It's not quite a physical stirring at first, nor is it really mental. It's on the borderline between the two. When you latch onto it, there will be a little bit of tension that you create in the body to provide a place for the mind to stay latched on. This is how the stirring turns into a swelling. In this way, thinking is both a mental and physical process. If you have this broadened state of awareness, you can dissolve the little swelling before it turns into a thought and can take over your whole awareness. As you stay with the breath energy in the whole body, you're operating right on the borderline between body and mind, between physical and mental phenomena – right where those thought-potentials begin to swell. You can deal more quickly with the beginning of anything, any potential that would come either in the body or the mind.

This is why concentration is such an important state for gaining insight – because it improves your vision. Your vision becomes more all-around, more precise, focused on the area where things get provoked, this interface between

body and mind. Then, if you want to think, you can think. If you don't, you don't have to. When the time comes to think, the mind will have been properly rested. Your thinking will be a lot clearer, more to the point. When the time comes to stop, you keep your thinking under control. It doesn't keep riding out in all directions.

Most people's thinking is like an uncontrolled nuclear chain reaction. One little neutron shoots out, runs into another nucleus, which sends out more neutrons, which keep on multiplying until suddenly the whole thing explodes. Concentration is like exerting control over the reaction, building a reactor and inserting graphite rods to make sure the reactions don't go out of control. If you want to shut everything down, you can insert all the rods all the way in, and everything will be still. That doesn't mean that the potential for a reaction isn't there, just that it's been stilled. If you need to think, pull the rods out a little bit to get just the reaction you want. When the thinking has done its work, you push the rods back in. This way, when thoughts come and go, you get whatever use you want out of them. They don't take over your mind. You stay in charge.