

Mindworms

June 24, 2021

When a tune gets stuck in your head and goes around and around and around, we call it an earworm. Well, the same thing can happen with your thoughts. You get fixated on a particular thing, a particular issue, and your thoughts just go around and around and around. They don't come to any clear conclusion. The conclusion leads you back to the beginning, so you go around again. We call this a *mindworm*. It bores away in your mind, and you realize you can't get out.

They say that with the heart, the patterns of energy that allow it to beat are quite complex. They have to be. That's what keeps you alive. Occasionally, if the heart gets into a simple circular pattern, it can beat itself to death. So, the key issue is to get out of that pattern if you want to maintain your health. Of course, that's physical health.

Mental health also requires that there be some complexity to your thoughts, some ways of getting out of those circular patterns. It's because of those circular patterns that people in solitary confinement can go crazy; monks alone off in the forest can get kind of strange. But even if you are with other people, the mind can get obsessed, and you can't get it out of that obsession.

This is one of the areas where it's useful to think about the mind as a committee. Tell yourself that you've got one crazy committee member who's just going around and around and around, going nowhere. The thoughts have no clear conclusion, which is why they don't stop. You've got to marshal your other committee members to pull you out.

The first thing, of course, is to try to get with the breath. Even if the mind is obsessed with things, the breath is still coming in, the breath is still going out. And here, having a whole-body awareness is really useful. Because the larger your awareness, the less likely it is to shrink and go back into that circular pattern. You can stand outside of the pattern. The breath gives you sensations throughout the body that enable you to step back.

Then you have whole series of other tools for dealing with it.

One is simply to tell yourself, "Okay, that pattern may be going on, but I don't have to get into it." It's your attention to the pattern that keeps it going. You can learn how to tell yourself that not all your thoughts are interesting, not all your thoughts are worthy of attention. And no matter how much the member of the committee may scream at you that what it's thinking about in a circular way is really important, you have to remind yourself there are other things that are more important. Gaining some control over the mind is more

important. Developing powers of mindfulness and alertness so that you can deal with whatever contingencies come up in the future is more important.

Look at that mindworm as a result of karma. You've got some old habits that have given rise to this circular pattern. But you have every right in the present moment not to go along with it.

This is the basic principle of meditation: that your present choices are much more important than things coming in from the past. So, you don't have to let yourself simply fall back into your old ruts.

This is where Ajaan Suwat's distinction between the not-self teaching with regard to the aggregates and the self teaching with regard to karma is useful. The mindworm is the result of old actions. Once an action has been done, the results are beyond your control. You can't go into the world and undo your past actions. So, you have to tell yourself: That's not-self now. You're not responsible for that any more. What you are responsible for is your present karma, the decisions you're making right now. Focus on to those decisions, and in particular hold on to the decision to stay back, to stay out. That's something you want to hold to really strongly.

Then you remind yourself: Buddha does talk about obsessions. There are seven of them all together. So, you can ask yourself, as a way of getting some distance from that mindworm: What kind of obsession is it? There's obsession around conceit, obsession around views, obsession around uncertainty, obsession around two kinds of passion—one is sensual passion, the other is passion for becoming—and then there's obsession around irritation and obsession around ignorance. So, which have you got? Are you concerned about a view of the world? Are you overtaken with uncertainty about things? How about conceit? Conceit here, remember, is not just pride, it's any sense of "*I am*," any sense of identity.

The mindworm may come from some sense of identity that felt threatened. One subset of conceit is grief, where you've lost someone or something that really was a part of you, part of your sense of who you were, someone or something who nourished the sense of who you were. Now that person, that thing is gone. Is that what your mindworm is about?

Are you obsessed with some sensual image in the mind? Some identity that you would like to take on in a particular world, around a particular desire? Are you irritated about something? Or is it just a lot of ignorance? Or is it all seven all at once? Sometimes the obsessions are like that. They pull in all their friends, every possible obsession there is.

Once you've got a label for these things, it's a little bit easier to step back and remind yourself: "I don't want to go there. That's something the Buddha said will get me into trouble. And I can see for myself that it's going to get me into trouble if I follow those things."

So, use both your concentration and your discernment to step back. The concentration and the breath give you another place to stand, another place to stay, a few different members of the committee that simply through force of will can resist. Then you bring in the discernment members: the ones that can reason, the ones that can see how stupid it is to fall for certain thoughts. They don't have to use a lot of force. Discernment simply turns on a light inside the mind so that you can see that what was all-obsessing pattern of thought is really very small when you look at the large scale of things.

That's the main problem with these mindworms: When you're *in* them, they're all-important. They color everything. It's like being in a soap bubble. You look through the soap bubble at the world outside, and it's colored the colors of the soap. It's only when you pop the bubble that you can see the world for what it really is.

So, use your concentration, use your powers of discernment to take a stance *outside* of the mindworm. Then ask yourself: What kind of obsession is this? Is it conceit? Conceit is a fetter. Is it uncertainty? Uncertainty is a hindrance. Is it a set of views? Views are part of that flood that can wash you away. Sensual passion, passion for becoming: Those are fetters too. As is ignorance. So, do you want to be fettered, hindered, washed away in the flood, or do you want to stand on some solid ground? Your sense of the body right here in the present moment: That's your solid ground for the time being, that's the reality. As for the reality of your thoughts, when you're *in* a thought, it seems real. But when you step out of it, you can see that it's just a bunch of fabrications.

So even if you can't stop the circular thinking, can't stop the mindworm, you can get out of it. Then show some patience. It takes some time for it to calm down, just like a truck that's been roaring down the highway. You can't get it to stop immediately. You have to let it slow down, slow down, slow down before it can stop.

So, you slow the mindworm down by not giving it so much attention.

This is one of our problems: We find our thoughts fascinating. Every little scrap of a thought that comes through the mind, we try to appreciate it, we give it importance. You have to realize the mind is like a factory with no quality control. It just churns out bits and pieces of stuff; sometimes it produces things that are really good, sometimes not so good, sometimes positively awful.

You have to learn how to be discerning as to which thoughts you hold on to and which thoughts you've got to get out of. But it is possible to step out.

As I said, this is where the image of the committee of the mind is useful. Not everybody in the mind has to be in that thought, and not every member of the mind *is* in that thought. It's just that one ego-centric person has taken over and dominated things, but there are other Yous in the mind as well. So even

though the mindworm may be screaming and crying, you don't have to give in to it, you don't have to believe it. You've got your tools for stepping out.

And as I said, it's attention that feeds it, so you starve it. The Buddha's image is of somebody looking away from something he doesn't want to see. You can think of it as a stray dog is coming to beg for some food, or a crazy person coming to talk to you. If you give the stray dog any food, it's going to hang around. If you talk along with the crazy person, even if it's to chase the crazy person away, he's got you. You've got to look the other way—and the breath gives you a good place to look.