

Thinking & Not Thinking

November 5, 2021

We've been thinking ever since we learned language. The mind churns out thoughts, and it gets so used to churning out the thoughts that it doesn't feel right *not* churning them out. It's like a factory that churns out products and can't stop. Whether the raw materials are good or bad, it just keeps churning out stuff.

When we come to meditate, one of the skills we want to learn is how to think the thoughts we want to think, and not think the thoughts we don't want to think—so that the mind can rest when it doesn't need to think, and gain a sense of well-being just being still. You need to learn how to feel okay being still, so that when the time comes that you really do have to think, you're sharper, well rested. Otherwise, it's like an engine that just keeps running and running and running all the time. You know that you're going to be using your car at some point, so you turn on the engine and just keep it running, just in case you may need to jump in and use it. That's wasteful and it wears the engine down.

So we have to get clear about what kind of thinking is useful thinking, what kind of thinking is not, and how to get rid of unskillful thinking.

For distracting thoughts that pull you away from meditation, the Buddha gives five methods: One is to just remind yourself that there are better things to think about; switch your attention back to a better topic. The second is to think about the drawbacks of the kind of thinking that's pulling you away, what kind of behavior would it lead you to. The third is realizing that you can simply ignore the thinking; not pay it any attention. The fourth is to realize that the thinking involves some energy, some effort, but it's wasted. It would be more restful not to think, so you relax any tension around your distracting thought.

Then the final one, if none of those methods work, is to grit your teeth, put your tongue against the roof of the mouth, and just tell yourself, "I will not think that thought." In other words, you replace the distracting thought with this thought: "I will not think anything else." Sometimes you can use a meditation word like *bud-dho*, *bud-dho* rapid fire, to keep the thoughts out.

But then you've got the issue of when skillful thinking is useful, and when even skillful thinking has to be put aside.

After all, the first jhana requires directed thought and evaluation. You try to bring the body and the feeling of pleasure and the mind together here in the present moment so that they stay together. With the body, it's the breath. Try to think of the breath, be aware of the breath as it's coming in going out. Watch it to see what kind of breathing feels good. Experiment to see what kind of breathing feels good.

At the same time, look after the mind. Be sensitive to the mind. Try to gladden it so that it's happy to be here. Part of gladdening requires talking to yourself about what a good thing it is that you're able to meditate. And then you can gladden it further by making the breath really comfortable, so that it's very pleasurable to stay here. That way, the mind begins to settle down and get concentrated.

Ultimately, you want the breath filling the body, a feeling of ease filling the body, and your awareness filling the body—all together. Then you put some thinking into maintaining that sense of altogether just right.

But then you hear that there are higher levels of concentration where there's no directed thought and evaluation, and you want to know how to get rid of the directed thought and evaluation. The answer is: Don't pay attention to that question. Just get really, really interested in your breath; really, really interested in the sense of being together, all together right here, right now.

In other words, you take, out of those five methods for dealing with distracting thoughts, two of them. One is paying no attention to the thinking, and the second one is the method of relaxing, realizing that thinking about things requires some use of energy, developing some patterns of tension through the body. Even in the first jhana, there's some tension in the body as you're thinking. You notice that in the breath, and so you relax the breath. You may come across part of the mind that doesn't feel at ease without having some thinking in the background. It's like people who can't live without the TV set on someplace in the house.

Or like those squirrels we have around here: A predator comes through and one of the watchman squirrels will start, "Cheep, cheep, cheep, cheep," cheeping,

and then the predator goes, and it's still there, "Cheep, cheep," cheeping away. It gets obsessed with its cheeping.

In the same way, a lot of us are obsessed with our thoughts. We find them really fascinating—or really necessary. Remind yourself there will come a point where they're not necessary. But you don't try to obliterate them. You simply get more and more interested in the breath. As the breath absorbs more and more of your attention, the thinking fades into the background.

So as I said, you're using two of those five methods: the method of not paying any attention to the distraction, and the method of relaxing.

As you pay attention to the breath, you'll notice when you're thinking that there will be a pattern of tension running here, running there in the body. Just think of it in terms of breath. Don't think of it in terms of the thoughts that are associated with it.

Here again, it's a matter of getting really, really interested in your breath and being able to develop a sense of well-being, right here, right now, in the same way that you let issues of the world fade away: not by chasing them away, but simply by not getting interested in them. You've found something more interesting: training the mind. Here you can get into the sense of the body as you feel it from within, with the sense that everything is united, everything feels good. Allow yourself to get absorbed by that.

If there's a voice in the mind that says, "Well, I won't have any thinking to protect that," just remind yourself that your attention to it is what protects it. So give it your full attention. Allow the thinking to fade away. You don't have to keep track of when you left the first jhana and go into the second jhana.

Remember, when you're doing jhana, jhana is not the topic of the meditation. The topic of the meditation is the breath. So stay fully absorbed in the topic. And that way, you really get to settle down.