

Obsessive Thinking

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The Buddha set out a triple training: what he called training in *heightened virtue*; training in *heightened mind*, which means concentration; and training in *heightened discernment*. When you hear that list, it sounds as if you have to perfect your virtue first before you go to concentration; then you perfect your concentration before you can develop discernment. But in practice, that's not how it happens. All three have to help one another along.

For instance, sometimes you don't really see the harm that's caused by breaking the precepts until you start meditating. Your mind gets more sensitive, and you see that it really does disturb the mind to break the precepts. And because you've begun to value your concentration, it gives you that much more strength in observing the precepts.

Similarly, with discernment: It's not the case that you get the mind still and *then* you start working on discernment. It happens sometimes, but there are other times when you can't really get the mind to settle down until you understand what's going on in the mind—particularly if you have a lot of thoughts crowding in and pulling you away.

You have to clear some space, and you can't just will them away or force them away. Sometimes you can, but there are a lot of times when you can't. That's when you have to understand them so that you can see through them. Then you can put them aside and get the mind to settle down.

When the Buddha talks about understanding your thoughts, there are five steps. The first one is to *see them arise*. This is a particularly helpful exercise when you have a state of mind that seems to be permanently there, like anger, grief, or depression. It seems as if those thoughts are there all the time, so you can't see that they actually arise at one point and fade away at another point. But when you look more carefully, you see that they do. No thought is permanently there. No emotion is permanently there.

There is some confusion caused by the hormones in the body. Say, anger arises, and then it goes, but when it's there in full force it gets some hormones churning in your blood stream. And then, even when the anger goes, the hormones are still there. You can very easily read that as a sign: "Oh, the anger must still be there," and you dig it up again.

So you have to learn how to make a distinction: What is the thought of anger? And what are the physical manifestations?

When you see something arise, it's not just a matter of watching its arising. You want to see what sparked it. Or, in the Buddha's terms, what's the *origination*? The Pali word for origination, *samudaya*, means what comes along with it, as a cause. Sometimes you'll see that a particular thought pattern gets triggered by a certain feeling in the body. Or a certain perception, a little image appears in the mind, you have associations with that image, and you just jump to the associated thoughts. You want to see that process in action, because seeing it and recognizing it will give you some distance from it.

In the same way, when the Buddha analyses the different things with which you could identify as you or yours—particularly as you, as your self: He says if you can see it arise, it can't be your self. After all, if you're here to see it arise, you're here to see it before it arises, and if you're here before it arises then it can't be your self. Or when you see it pass away, if you're here to see that it's gone, it can't be your self. That observation should give you some distance.

It's the same with any kind of thought, whether it's specifically a thought of "this is me," "this is mine," or more generally a feeling that "this is my thought." Now, it is possible to have something that you say is "mine" that comes and goes. But seeing it come and seeing it go, where you previously thought that it was a constant hum in the background: That gives you some distance—and it gives you a handle on it.

So, those are the first two steps: seeing the origination, and seeing the passing away. No matter how many times it comes into being or passes away, you want to note when it's there, when it's not.

Then when it does come back, what sparked it? Why do you pick it up again? This leads to the third step, which is to *see the allure*. What is it that you like about this?

Now, the liking here may not be the idea, "I really enjoy this kind of thinking." There may be a sense of compulsion. You feel compelled to think this way; you feel you ought to think in this way. Especially with worries: There's a part of the mind that says, "If I don't worry enough, I'm not preparing for the future," and you feel virtuous about worrying. Or with grief: There are times when you feel, "If I'm not feeling grief, I'm not being loyal to the person or the situation I've lost."

So, the allure here may be a pleasant feeling or a sense of obligation—so notice that. What is it that the mind feeds on that makes it want to go with this again, or feel that it *should* go with this again, this particular thought?

This is an area where you have to be very honest with yourself, because there are a lot of times where we go for a type of thinking where our conscious minds

say, “Oh, I don’t like this thinking at all. I can’t identify with this, this isn’t really me,” because it doesn’t fit in with our image of ourselves.

Or if the allure shows a side of you that you don’t particularly like, you tend to hide it. When you hide it, you’re not going to understand the power of the thought or the emotion. You’re certainly not going to be able to get past it. We can’t get past things simply saying, “Well, they’re inconstant, stressful, not-self, I’ll just put them aside.”

I was talking the other day to someone who’s having difficulties with some narratives that she keeps telling herself, that keep driving her crazy. And I said, “You have to remind yourself that this is a narrative.” She said, “Oh yes, and because it’s a narrative, I should just not pay attention to it.” I said, “No, it’s a narrative that you like—part of you likes. That’s what you’ve got to look into.”

This is where it’s good to think of the mind as a committee. There are some committee members who like this. It’s only when you ferret out those members that you can do something about them.

Then, the fourth step is to really look carefully at the *drawbacks* of that kind of thinking. Where is it going to take you? If you were to think this thought for a day and a night, where would it lead you? If you were to act on it, where would it lead you? If acting on it meant that you would do something really unskillful, why think it?

Then, when it really hits home that the allure is pretty meager, or pretty embarrassing, and it certainly doesn’t compensate for the drawbacks, that’s when you get to the fifth step which is *dispassion*. You outgrow the thought. It loses its appeal. This is how you escape from it.

The Thai ajaans like to talk of dispassion basically as growing up or overcoming an intoxication: You finally sober up. You realize that you’ve been intoxicated with a particular thought, and now your understanding of that way of thinking is clear. You can step outside it, so that the next time it comes back, it doesn’t have the same appeal, and you get a greater sense of distance from it. When you can get some distance from it, that’s when the mind can settle down.

There are two ways of getting the mind into concentration: directed and undirected. The undirected approach is when you see whatever the mind is holding on to that’s not an object of concentration that you want, and you let go of it. The mind settles down on its own, without your having to think consciously about the body or feelings or any of the frames of reference. Then there’s the directed approach, in which you actually are thinking specifically about the breath, thinking specifically about whatever your meditation topic is.

But that *undirected* approach: That's where you use your discernment to peel away your attachments. You may not be able to uproot them entirely, but as long as you can step back from them and stop feeding them—because we do feed them with our attention: When there's a sense that they're not really interesting anymore, they don't really serve a purpose, that's when you stop feeding them, and the mind inclines into the present moment. This is concentration fostered by discernment.

So, as you're training yourself, don't wait until your virtue is perfect before you do concentration, and don't wait until your concentration is perfect before you work on discernment. Work on all three.

Using your discernment here requires some thought. Those techniques where they say, "Just note, note, note, and you're going to get insight": You gain a certain amount of insight, but there's a lot you're going to miss if you don't look in terms of these five steps.

When the Buddha talks about insight, it's always in terms of seeing the origination, seeing the passing away, the allure, the drawbacks, and the escape through dispassion. When you see all those things, that's when you really understand what's going on in the mind and can free yourself from unskillful thinking. And that's what helps to make your training complete.