

## *Doubts*

*July 19, 2022*

One of the purposes of the practice is to develop the skill to think the thoughts you want to think, and not think the thoughts you don't want to think. And as we all know, a lot of the meditation is about not thinking thoughts. If any thoughts do come up as you're trying to focus on the breath, if they're not related to the breath, you try to put them aside.

If you find yourself wandering off, the Buddha has five major methods for not thinking about those things.

One is simply to notice that you've wandered off. You've moved to another topic that's not as skillful, so you go back to the topic that's more skillful. If, for example, you notice that you're wandering off because the breath is too weak, you strengthen the breath. Or if it's not comfortable, you ask yourself, "What can I do to make the breath more comfortable?" So you *are* engaged in some thinking as you're staying here—thinking related to staying with the breath—but you have to fend off everything else.

If the distracting thoughts come back again, the Buddha recommends that you think about the drawbacks of thinking them. You can ask yourself, "Here I am, trying to meditate, trying to get the mind to settle down, so why am I thinking about these things?" Old issues come up, sometimes from the day, sometimes from years back. Why do you want to go over them again? If you were to think about them for 24 hours, where would they take you? Anywhere good?

Remember, the Buddha said that when you allow your mind to go down certain avenues of thought, you're bending the mind in that direction. Do you want your mind to be bent in the direction of lust? Do you want it to be bent in the direction of anger? Greed? Jealousy? The Buddha's image is of a young woman or a young man fond of ornament who looks in the mirror and sees a carcass of a dead snake or a dead dog around his or her neck. The disgust that that person would feel: You're trying to develop the same kind of disgust for the thoughts that would pull you away from the breath, and that the mind seems to want to go back to, again and again—like a dog rolling over something dead that it's found on the ground.

If that method doesn't work, the Buddha says to learn how not to pay any attention to those thoughts. Think of yourself as working on a task, and a crazy person comes along and tries to engage you in conversation. You know that if you pay any attention to the crazy person, even enough to try to drive the crazy person

away, he's got you. So you act as if he's not there. Pay him no mind. When you don't feed those crazy thoughts with your attention, they'll go away. It may take a while, but they'll go away.

The fourth method is realizing that when you're thinking a distracting thought, it takes some energy. Where are you exerting the energy to think that thought? You might notice that there's a pattern of tension someplace in the body that corresponds to that thought. Well, breathe through it. Relax it, and the thought should go away.

Finally, if none of these methods work, then you press your tongue against the top of your mouth and, as the Buddha said, you crush your mind with your mind. In other words, you simply will yourself not to think that thought. This is where a rapid-fire meditation word comes in handy. Like buddhobuddhobuddho, really fast, like a machine gun, until the thought is passed. Then you can go back to one of the other methods, or, ideally, back to the topic of your meditation.

Those are some of the skills in not thinking. But then what about that skill in thinking the thoughts you do want to think? Part of it lies in learning how to be more discerning in what you should want to think. Remember that monk who came to see the Buddha one time and asked him, "Is the world eternal? Is the world not eternal? Is it finite? Is it infinite? Is the soul the same thing as the body, or is it something else? How about the arahant? After the arahant passes, does he or she exist or not exist or both or neither?" The Buddha replied that if you get involved in those questions, they actually get in the way of the path. In other words, they're not simply a distraction. They're actually an obstacle.

He made the comparison with a person shot by an arrow who goes to the doctor, but then, before the doctor pulls out the arrow, demands, "Before you pull it out, I want to know who shot the arrow, what the arrow was made of, what feathers it was made of, what wood it was made of." If he insisted on that, he'd die first.

In the same way, you're suffering. Questions having to do with anything aside from the question of how to stop suffering are, at best, simply a waste of time. At worst, they get you involved in issues that block the path. So you have to learn how to think. Which thoughts are worth thinking about? Which doubts are worth looking into? Which ones are worth putting aside for the time being? As the Buddha points out, there are a lot of questions that fascinate us. "Do I exist? Do I not exist? What am I? Who am I?" He calls those questions of inappropriate attention. And you might say, "Well, I can wait until after the problem of suffering is solved, then I'll come back to those questions." But as the Buddha noted, once you've solved the problem of suffering, you realize that those

questions hold no interest for you. So that's one category, a huge category: questions that are really irrelevant to the problem. You just have to tell yourself that those are getting in the way.

However, there are other areas where your doubts are legitimate, such as doubts about the practice, doubts about your ability to do the practice. And here the Buddha gives you some guidelines. There's a passage where he talks about how you can starve your doubts by applying appropriate attention to the questions of what's skillful and what's not skillful, and observing your mind: seeing when a certain quality comes up in the mind, and asking: Does it lead in the direction of suffering or does it lead in the other direction?

In other words, you don't just try to deny the doubt. You don't try to snuff it out with a lot of stillness. The doubt is there, and if it's related to the path, you've got to resolve it to at least some extent. The best way to resolve doubts is not just to reason things through, although that helps. But as the Buddha said, being reasonable is not a guarantee that something is true. It would have been interesting to hear a conversation between him and Kant. Kant's idea was that reality has to be reasonable. Therefore, anything that didn't fit into what he thought was reasonable couldn't be real. But not everything that seems reasonable is actually true.

The best way to test the truth of something, the Buddha said, is that once you've decided that it does make sense, you actually try to develop what he says are skillful qualities in the mind, and to abandon unskillful qualities. Give it a try. See what results you get. That's an empirical proof, and he gives different standards throughout the Canon for judging the results. In his teachings to the Kalamas, the standards are pretty simple. Any teaching, any mind state that would lead you to get involved in greed, aversion, delusion, and get you to break the precepts, you've got to say No.

When he was talking to his stepmother, Mahapajapati Gotami, he went into more detail. Anything that leads to passion, getting fettered, entanglement, being burdensome, that leads to holding on to things that you should be shedding, that inspires lack of effort, lack of contentment: Those things, he said, you've got to abandon. Any mental quality that leads in the other direction? Develop that. So those are empirical proofs, where you can see, "If I develop these qualities in the mind, do they get the desired results?"

There are other issues that are related to the question of suffering, but you can't really resolve them until you've had your first taste of awakening. Some of them are pretty basic: "Is karma for real? Do my mental actions really have influence over what happens in my life?" Those are things you can't prove until

you've had your taste of the deathless. But in the meantime, you've got to take them on as the working hypotheses that the Buddha recommends.

But are they good hypotheses? You can test them by what's called a pragmatic proof: "If I were to assume rebirth, and assume the importance of karma, and assume the importance of my mental actions in particular, what kind of person would I become? What kind of actions would I engage in?" And you realize that these hypotheses inspire in skillful actions. So they're wise working hypotheses.

There's another set of issues: "Is it possible to put an end to becoming? Is it possible that there is something unconditioned that the human mind can know?" Again, you can't really know these things until you've committed yourself to the practice. But as the Buddha points out, if you assume that these things are *not* possible when you don't really know, then you cut off the possibility there actually could be a true happiness. So why cut off that possibility through your ignorance? It's wiser, he said, to leave the possibility open. There are good people who say that these things are true. If you accept that as a working hypothesis, at the very least you leave the possibility open. You're not shutting the door on yourself. That's a second kind of pragmatic proof.

So the Buddha gives you standards not only for learning how not to think thoughts, but also for what kinds of thoughts are useful, what ways of thinking are useful, what ways of overcoming your doubts actually can overcome your doubts —not by snuffing them out, but by actually learning. Because the only thing that's going to resolve doubt is discernment, the kind of discernment that leads to release. That's when you know for sure that what the Buddha taught was true. Until then, you have to go on working hypotheses, so choose the ones that are wise. Learn how to think in the ways that the Buddha recommends.

As I said the other day, it's like learning the scientific method. Anything that passes the test of the method qualifies as valid knowledge. Anything that doesn't pass the test you can put it aside.

Now, the scientific method works with material things. The Buddha gives you a similar method for sorting out the truths of the mind, for overcoming doubts about your own mind and the power of the mind to find happiness. After all, that is the big issue. The question about whether the world is eternal or not is not really the big issue. The big issue is: Can you find true happiness? And if so, how? If you have doubts about that, you've got to resolve them at least to the point where you can say, "Okay, I'll give the Buddha's teachings a try."

So keep this principle in mind: There are certain thoughts that are good not to think, and other thoughts that are good to think. Knowing that principle clears up a lot of confusion.