

## *Thoughts About Thinking*

*March 2, 2023*

We start with thoughts of goodwill to clear the decks. Any issues you may have had with people during the day, get them out of the way, because you're trying to give the mind a place it can settle down in, right here, right now. And you don't want those attitudes to be getting in the way.

If you're worried about issues in the future, remind yourself: The best way to prepare for the future is to develop your powers of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency right here, because the future is uncertain. But you do know that when you're dealing with uncertain things, unexpected things, the more mindfulness and alertness you have, the better off you'll be. So you're preparing the right tools.

As for thoughts of the past, if there are any mistakes you made in the past that suddenly come thronging into the mind, remind yourself: You can't go back and change those things. The best that can be asked of a human being is to recognize a mistake as a mistake, to resolve not to repeat it, then to develop thoughts of goodwill again—for yourself, for the person you wronged, for all beings in all directions. This helps to put things into perspective, because when you start thinking about all beings in all directions, you realize: Everybody's done wrong things in the past. It's not just you.

That thought gets you more and more inclined to think about all of the wrong things that could be done in the future as long as you stay in this cycle of death and rebirth and karma and more karma and more karma. Maybe it'd be good to get out. And how are you going to get out? Well, the exit is right here. In other words, you're learning how to think in a way that brings the mind into the present moment, where it can then put a lot of its thinking down.

Now, in the beginning, you do think. After all, two of the factors of the first level of jhana are directed thought and evaluation. So you direct your thoughts here, and you evaluate what's going on. Here, again, you're using thinking to bring the mind to stillness.

Sometimes you find that you can spend the whole hour thinking about the breath: different breath energies in the body and how you can coordinate them. If there's a pain someplace in the body, you can ask yourself: How can you use the breath to help with the pain, so that even though the pain may stay there, you don't feel so afflicted by it?

Other times, it doesn't take all that much thought, and the mind will settle down, get the breath comfortable very quickly

Then you learn how to stay here. That's a different set of skills: less thinking, but a lot of vigilance. You check to see whether the mind is ready to run off someplace. It'll send its signals.

Scientists have studied people who aren't aware of when they've made a decision. The decision comes to the surface of their minds after it's been made, and the scientists use that fact to "prove" that people are not really making decisions at all. They're made someplace down in their molecules or their nerves. But actually, that's just a sign that their minds have lots of walls inside. They've learned how to cover up a lot of things inside.

But if you get the mind really quiet, you can start seeing when a decision is made way before it becomes obvious, before it comes to the surface. When you can detect that, then you can make whatever adjustments are needed so that you don't go with it: either just reaffirming your decision that you're going to stay with the breath, or making the breath more comfortable, going back and doing a little more directed thought and evaluation, or just breathing right through wherever you sense there's a physical correlate to that thought. Otherwise, you just watch. And you learn how to watch again and again, continually.

You're like a hunter. You're waiting to see when the animals are going to come. You can't determine ahead of time when they're going to come, but you have to be ready for them at any time. Or like a sentry or someone up in the fire tower in the forest: You have to be quiet. You have to watch. You have no idea when the thing you're watching for is going to come. But you do know you have to be ready.

So develop that same kind of attitude. You're ready to watch. Maintain that. Protect what you've got. As you do this, you begin to see the mind settling down even more, even more. Then there will come times when you've had a sense that the mind is thoroughly rested and it's ready to think again. The question is, what do you think about now?

Well, think about that sutta where the Buddha talks about how he got on the right path. He started dividing his thoughts into two types: the types that were going to be skillful and the types that were not. What does that mean? It means he was not looking at the contents so much. He was looking at where the thoughts were coming from and where they were going. In other words, he was looking at them as processes.

Now, that approach to thinking is really useful. It's in line with the four noble truths. We want to see which thoughts are part of the cause of suffering and which thoughts are part of the path away from suffering. It's as if you have a

factory here that's producing very erratically: sometimes good products, sometimes bad ones. And you're trying to figure out: Why is that?

Sometimes it'll require looking at the product itself, to get an idea of what could go wrong. But a lot of it has to do with going back and just looking at the machinery in the factory, looking at the workers, looking at the whole process, starting from the design of the product, through the implementation, and then the final product coming out. That's what you want to investigate. What happens to the product as it goes out into the world—that's not the problem. The problem is, why is it that the quality control in the factory is so bad? Can you blame it on the workers? Can you blame it on the middle-level management, the upper-level management? Can you blame it on the materials? Can you blame it on the machinery? There's a lot to explore here. There's a lot to investigate.

Investigation requires questions, of course. Just think of investigators out in the world. They have to ask questions. The people who analyze what's going wrong with a particular company have to ask questions of everybody in the company. But they have to ask the right questions.

And here, the Buddha gives you some guidance. This particular factory is best understood in the framework of the four noble truths. There's suffering in here, and there's something causing the suffering. The Buddha gives you some indications. He doesn't just say there *is* suffering. He says it's the clinging to the five aggregates. Okay, what are those aggregates? What types of clinging are there? You can read about them in the books, but how do you actually experience them yourself? How do you get a sense of how the terms in the books apply to what's going on inside you?

Then there's the question: What can you do to put an end to that clinging and craving? You find that you have to take some of the things you've been clinging to and turn them into a path. There's clinging to the five aggregates—that's suffering. But then there are five aggregates involved in the path. Concentration takes all five of the aggregates. Your discernment is going to require perceptions and thought-fabrications.

So if you come across a perception, how do you know whether it's part of the problem or part of the solution? You ask some questions. You look at its behavior. This is one of the aspects of the Buddha's teachings that's so distinctive: looking at the behavior of those activities in the mind, the activities that we use to try to understand the world outside. Look at those activities in and of themselves. Try to understand *them*. Try to understand the activities of the path.

And have a sense of when your investigations are going off course. The Buddha mentions that there's a distinction among his teachings: There are the teachings

that should be explored to see what the implications are, and there are other ones where you *don't* try to draw out their implications. That second category is interesting. One, it shows that the Buddha's not concerned about building a view of the world in and of itself. If he were trying to develop a consistent theory about the world, everything would have to be consistent, and everything would have to be followed through with its implications.

And in some cases, he *is* talking about how this is how the world works, especially how the world of the mind works. But at other times, he has you take teachings and hold on to them as tools for making a change in the mind itself: what we might call “performative” teachings.

Like the questionnaire about things being inconstant, stressful, not-self: That's meant to perform a function on your mind, to change things in your mind. That's one of those teachings where the Buddha tells people: Be very careful about how far you explore the implications. When you're looking at the Canon, you see where the Buddha scolds people for taking some of those teachings and trying to work out the implications. It's usually around what we call “the three characteristics,” as in one case where one of the monks said, “Well, given that all feelings are stressful, and all your actions creates feelings, that means all actions create stress and pain.”

The Buddha says, “When you're talking about karma, you have to talk about the three kinds of feelings: pleasure, pain, neither pleasure nor pain”—because after all, if you tell everybody, “Whatever you do is going to lead to pain,” then why would they want to bother trying to be skillful? You've misapplied the teaching. You've worked out implications that are not useful. You've taken teachings meant to be performative, and you're trying to use them to describe.

The same with the teaching, *sabbe dhammā anattā*: “All dhammas are not-self.” Some people take that to mean, “Well, the Buddha must be saying that there is no self.” But then he says that when anybody tries to take that implication out of his teachings, they've gone too far. He specifically says that the theory that there is no self is just as bad as the theory that there is a self. In other words, both of these things can get you tied up in knots. He calls them “a thicket of views, a wilderness of views.” But if the mind is ready for the teaching, *sabbe dhammā anattā*, “All phenomena are not-self,” then it really can perform its effect on the mind.

It's like one of those messages you'd get in *Mission: Impossible*. They say, “Read this message and then destroy the message.” *Sabbe dhammā anattā*—he uses that partly to remind you that even if you've had an experience of the deathless, it is

possible to cling to that experience, as you turn it into an object of the mind. So you've got to see that that's not worth holding on to.

But then the sentence itself is a dhamma. If you were to follow it through, you'd have to abandon it, too. That's when you can abandon all the aggregates, including the fabrications and perceptions that go into *sabbe dhammā anattā*. That's when you're free.

So that's a teaching that's meant to do something to the mind, rather than just describe things. It gets you to develop that value judgment of dispassion toward everything. But it has to come at the right time. If you're dispassionate toward everything at the beginning of the path, you abort the whole thing.

So thinking, especially thinking about the Dhamma, requires that you have a clear sense of how far you should go with some teachings. Some teachings you can carry all the way through in terms of their implications. Other teachings, you have to take them only so far, because you realize that if you take them away from what they say, they no longer can perform on the mind. If you try to hold on to the idea that there is no self, what does that do? It becomes a position that you have to argue over, that you have to defend against all takers. And that's certainly not going to put an end to suffering. It becomes an object of clinging for you, too. But *sabbe dhammā anattā* teaches you: "Let go everything else, but also let go of me."

So try to be very clear about how to think about things, how to think about the Dhamma—because you do have to think. You can't just concentrate your way to awakening or jhāna your way to awakening. You get the mind still and then you have to develop not only tranquility, but also insight. And insight is not just a technique where you note things. Insight is where you figure things out inside. Know when to think. Know when not to think. Know how to think, how far to think. Know when your thinking should be descriptive, and when it should be performative.

That's when you become a master of your thoughts. We've lived our lives so long with our thoughts as our masters. Now it's time to turn things around.