

Chapter 4: Simply Being Present With Our Thoughts/Thinking

Review of What We Learned in Chapters 1, 2 and 3 (Parts I, II, III)

In the first three chapters we learned how to work mindfully with our breath, body sensations, sounds, and feelings/emotions. We covered concepts such as:

- Knowing and feeling experiences in the body
- Relaxing, receiving and allowing the experience to be just as it is; letting go of how things have to be, not changing or fixing anything; pushing nothing away
- Releasing judgment (good/bad, right/wrong); impartiality.
- Letting go of trying to achieve a certain state such as peace or calm or blanking the mind of all thought.
- Loving ourselves just as we are—whether we happen to like what we are experiencing or not
- Being patient and gentle with an unconditional friendliness to ourselves.

With this chapter we work with another part of reality for us--how our mind works with thoughts and thinking. All of the things we learned about how to meditate in the first three chapters holds true in this chapter as well.

Few issues cause more concern for those beginning to meditate than thoughts and thinking that are strong and that just does not seem to want to quit. A common comment from people who resist beginning to meditate is, “I can’t meditate because I can’t sit still,” or “I can’t meditate because I can’t stop my mind from thinking.” Being able to think is a gift we humans have, yet runaway thinking is not a mind to which we aspire. The good news is that thoughts/thinking does not have to be a problem. There are ways while sitting in meditation, as well as throughout our day, to work with an obsessive, thinking mind. Our mind need not control us and our experience. In the previous chapters we’ve learned how to give some quality attention to our breath, body sensations, sounds, and to our moods and emotions. Now, in Chapter 4, we are adding mindfulness to our stream of thoughts and thinking. What we will work on in this chapter is awareness of thoughts and thinking and of our having agency with that awareness.

About “having thoughts” and “being lost in thinking”

First, thoughts for some people come in words. For others, thoughts come in pictures or a combination of pictures and words. This is all normal and natural. Simply be yourself.

Having thoughts and thinking is a major part of our life. Thinking is a major function of our mind. It is how we create our life. All of creation begins with a thought. It is our thoughts, and the thinking that may follow, that is translated into action and words. Planning, organizing, analyzing, remembering etc. requires thinking. Thinking is a part of judging, assuming, interpreting, having an opinion, and believing things. So, to have thoughts and to think is important in our lives.

When we know how our mind works, it then can become our servant, something that we can use skillfully. If we are not aware of our thoughts and of our thinking, we are much more susceptible to

mindlessly reacting unskillfully in action or words. If we are aware of our thoughts/thinking, we can listen from some place in our heart and respond with skillfulness. When we see or are aware of our thoughts as they arise, we are in a better position to choose to not let unskillful thoughts develop into full-blown thought storms.

Having a thought and thinking are two very different things. A thought is no more than a thought unless you identify with it, start a story around it, and then allow it to define you. A thought is simply a thought; thinking requires involvement. For example, a thought enters our mind that is critical of someone. That is only a thought unless we make it something more with a story about how bad “I” am for having it, wondering if the thought will ever go away, wondering why “I” am even having the thought, or possibly how justified “I” am in having it. Stories are typically referenced by “I,” “me,” or “mine.”

The issue about thoughts and thinking in meditation is not so much about having or not having thoughts or thinking or not thinking. It is more about how to be with thoughts when they arise. It is natural for thoughts to arise spontaneously. We cannot will our thoughts, and we cannot control when they enter or exit our mind. The issue is not about keeping thoughts from arising or eliminating them. The issue is more about how to stay in the present moment and how to not get sidetracked or get lost in stories about the thoughts when they arise. Getting lost in thought generally takes you out of the reality of the present and leads you to the past or future. It leads you to story lines and discursive thinking. Joseph Goldstein, one of the founders of the Insight Meditation Center in Barre, Massachusetts, says, “There is a difference in being aware of thought and being lost in thought.”

Recognizing A Thought As *Simply A Thought*

Thoughts enter our mind constantly. I’ve found no source that definitively indicates where our thoughts come from. We do not cause our thoughts; we do not will them; and we cannot control when they show up. What we can do is notice them when they show up.

Awareness recognizes thoughts simply as thoughts. Thoughts, then, become an object of awareness. Our work is to notice a thought as nothing more than a thought. We may simply note “thought.” Some thoughts will come with associated body sensations. If so, we notice those sensations as well without trying to change or fix them. A thought is just a thought unless we make it something more—unless we turn it into thinking with a story and identifying with it.

Content vs Process of Thoughts/Thinking (This is a big deal!)

When observing our thoughts and thinking, there are two distinct things we can become aware of. One is the *content*. This is what most people identify with and attach to. It is the story that is typically centered around “I,” “me” or “mine.” The other is the *process* of thinking. This is how the body is responding to and experiencing in body sensations what is going on in the mind. *In meditation we are more concerned with the process.*

When we focus on the content, we are often drawn into the story, and then the story escalates. At the same time we have little awareness and may be totally oblivious to what is happening in the body. When we are centered in our body and focused on the process, we are less likely to be pulled into the story and into thinking. We become aware of all the sensations going on in the body. It is my experience that it is almost impossible for me to be focused on my body and keep a story going in my mind at the same time. Stories typically have narratives that involve something that has happened in the past or they are concerned about something that is about to happen in the future. Being in my body requires me to be present right here right now. It is not historical or futuristic; it is truly living and being present in the now.

Thinking is embodied. It reaches all the muscles and nervous systems in our body. For example, if I am sitting and a thought arises where I am reminded of something unskillful I did 20 years ago or something I'm excited about experiencing next week, my body will definitely respond in sensations. It might be difficult for me to get the thoughts out of my mind. When compulsive thinking is present, look at what is happening in the body. Depending on the thought, my body may experience a change in how I breathe, tension and tightening in my shoulders and belly, or the flip side, relaxed muscles. My body will experience such things whether I am aware of them or not. If the sensations are left unnoticed, they actually help create the continued thinking. The way to work with this in meditation is to be present with those sensations with non judgment. Do not push them away. Be gentle and soft toward them. Be with the process of thinking and not with the content, and see what happens. What a lot of this is about is stopping the resistance/aversion to what is real. Two old adages, "what we resist will persist" and "the truth will set you free" are true.

An excerpt from *True Refuge* by Tara Brach,

"When we wake from charged thoughts, remembering an anchor such as the breath can initially help us to come back. But to be fully here, we need to mindfully include the sensations that live beneath the thoughts. Any thought or mental perception is expressed in corresponding physical feelings; conversely our feelings also give rise to thoughts. This means that unless we bring both elements of this self-reinforcing loop into conscious awareness, we will continue to be hooked into the identity of an endangered wanting self. If we are unaware of our thought process, we are buying into the content of our thoughts which are in turn keeping generating feelings and craving and fear. In the same way if we are unaware of the anxiety in our bodies, we are identifying with the felt sense of endangerment and craving, and are generating a new cycle of obsessive thinking. Then, an emotion that lasts for a minute and a half becomes a weather system that settles in for the long haul." Further Tara says, "the best medicine for obsession is taking refuge in the truth of the present moment." She also says, "If you can notice when you are obsessing and then feel what is going on in your body, you will eventually find peace of mind."

We learn the skill of working with thoughts and thinking just like we learn any other skill—as discussed in the last chapter, it is a process. I have been working personally for years now with thoughts/thinking. When I began, my effort in doing this was deliberate and intentional. With continued practice over time, now when I notice obsessive thinking, I naturally and almost immediately go to my body. It is also normal for me to automatically begin the RRAIN process that we discussed in Chapter 3. Often when I am present in my body with what is happening, I quickly get ideas of how to respond or proceed going forward. Innate wisdom often helps me know what to say or do next.

Working with Thoughts/Thinking During Meditation and During Daily Life Practice

Thoughts sometimes come rapid fire, other times they seem to be just waiting in the shadows to slip in slowly when the urge is there. Thoughts are sometimes quiet and sneaky. You are really calm and quiet, then thoughts enter your mind, “It is really quiet in here,” or “I haven’t had any thoughts yet.” In meditation when a thought arises, it can simply be seen as a thought. Name and note it, then return to the breath as an anchor. It can be so easy to identify with our thoughts and begin a story line that this may not be as easy as it might sound. As with body sensations or feelings/emotions, if thoughts are not strong, we simply note them and then return to our breath. A gentle note of “thought” or even a gentle “not now” or “stop” will help us return to our breath. Pay special attention to the tone of your voice when you use the words to note a thought. Gentleness is key.

But if thoughts are strong, we turn our meditative attention to what is going on in the body and possibly we can investigate it. When thoughts no longer tug at us, we return to the breath as our anchor. If thoughts are really strong and persistent, or if we let them go and they come right back, you may want to investigate what is going on. There is no need to judge yourself or your meditating as being bad, nor is there any need to try to figure out why this is happening or where the thoughts are coming from. Be more concerned with how do I work with this? Simply be with thinking in a kind, friendly and neutral way. You might consider using the mental note, “thinking.” That acknowledgment may be enough to settle the issue. But, if thinking is much louder, you may need more investigation. Again, explore the process in the body and not the content. You are not trying to figure out why or how to resolve the content. Look at things like the tone of your voice, energy, speed, and what you are feeling in your body. If thinking is really persistent, chances are that it is being fueled by an emotion. You may be able to get rid of the thoughts, but if you do not acknowledge the emotion, the thoughts will never really cease. So, your mindfulness may at some point turn to being with and feeling the emotion. Insight meditation is about clearly seeing what is the real reality of what is happening in the moment.

For example, let’s say you have a mind that really likes to plan. You are always well prepared, and for everything. Friends like to be with you because they don’t have to work at planning at all. You do it for everyone. You are detailed, and that is a positive quality! You are rewarded and often praised for being organized. Others sometimes wish they were like you. You come to meditation knowing you are responsible for an event that will happen in two weeks. As you sit, it is difficult to stop the thoughts of planning. Just noting “planning” or “thinking” may not stop the thoughts. You return to your breath, and in a breath or two you are right back to planning the event. You are trying to think of everything that could go wrong at the event, and you are wanting to avoid them all. It seems impossible for your mind to settle.

Question: Could there be a hidden emotion at work here? Maybe yes. Maybe no. Only you can answer that. You may want to investigate further by noticing what your body is telling you? You might notice if the sensations in your body are similar to other times when you are experiencing fear (possibly not wanting to fail at something), apprehension or anxiety? Or your body might simply be experiencing excitement or delight about being with this project. If any of the situations of fear, apprehension, anxiety, or excitement connect with you, then you could acknowledge and be present with the emotion itself. You could note or name the fear, apprehension, anxiety, or excitement and feel it fully in your body. Acknowledge, welcome, befriend and love the emotion just as it is. Simply receive and allow it without judging it. If the emotion is fully acknowledged and felt, when you go

back to your breathing, you may not be so easily pulled back into the thinking. What this example is portraying is that obsessive thoughts of planning can be a cover for the symptom of an emotion such as fear of failure. If you disentangle yourself from the emotion, you may also more easily disentangle yourself from the obsessive thinking.

The more definite something is acknowledged, the easier it can be to get untangled from it. Please know that when I write this, I am not judging the emotion one way or the other. If we get pulled into the emotion without knowing it, and a story gets going, and if we are identified one way or the other with it, the story will fuel the thinking and keep it going.

Another common example comes when we have obsessive thoughts involving anger. When a story develops where we are being righteous justifying our view or proving that we are right, or where we are blaming someone else for a situation, and if the thinking just will not stop, it might be wise to STOP and PAUSE and investigate if a possible underlying unresolved emotion may be fueling the story. Anger is an emotion that never comes alone. There is always an underlying feeling present, and it often is either fear, hurt, or loss. If either of these underlying emotions is unconsciously present, the thinking, as well as the anger, will likely not dissipate until the feeling of fear, hurt, or loss is acknowledged and felt. In working with conflict resolution at 3M Company, I found that if two employees were really angry at one another to the point of not being able to work together, for them to say or express “I am angry” was not enough. It was only when the underlying emotion was acknowledged and felt that the anger dissipated. For example, it was only when one person could say, “When you said this or did that, I was hurt or I became afraid,” that we could begin the process of healing the situation. Acknowledging the underlying emotion was the path to resolving the emotion of anger. Anger was a symptom of something deeper that needed to be felt. Where anger and the story behind it is typically a mind and thinking activity, the feeling words of “fear” or “hurt” now include the heart.

Looking at our thoughts –the difference between “fact” and “thought”

Much of our difficulty in working with interpersonal communications with others and working with our own internal self dialogue is that we do not differentiate between *facts* and *thoughts*. A fact is something that can be documented and is provable. For example, the word “provable” has eight letters. That it has eight letters is a fact. It is something that all of us could agree on. Thoughts on the other hand are typically things that can be seen differently by different people. *Thought* is an umbrella word that represents our assumptions, opinions, interpretations, judgments and beliefs. What we think (assume, opine, interpret, judge or believe) about something is usually clouded with our filters that stem from what we learned growing up or our past conditioning--what an authority figure has told us to believe, what we’ve bought into since we were born, our past experiences, or simply our preferences. For example, I can listen to the weather report and hear it said, “It is going to be a beautiful sunny day today.” The word *beautiful* could be seen and judged through different filters. One person who wants to go to the beach will see it one way, and the farmer whose pasture is drying up because it has not rained in four weeks may interpret the statement in a very different way. Whether the day is beautiful or not depends on the filters through which the statement is fed. Thoughts are not facts.

Not understanding fact vs thought is a huge reason I believe we have so much difficulty in our political dialogue today. It is not that facts are good or bad or that thoughts are good or bad. It is that so many

people hear thoughts (opinions, assumptions, interpretations, judgments, and beliefs) and they take them as facts. And I might add that at one point in my life I had some personal issues that I was working through with a counselor. A major part of my personal work and healing process had to do with learning and becoming aware of the many thoughts I carried in the internal dialogue in my mind that I interpreted as facts. My entire shame-based personality was based on assumptions, that were owned as facts. When I started being mindful of my thoughts, I started asking myself this question, “What if that is not true?” Asking that simple question has impacted my life in a huge way. The way I now keep thoughts and facts separated in both my speaking out loud and in my self talk is to mindfully and consciously include words to express thoughts—i.e. “I assume that, “My opinion is,” “I believe that,” “My interpretation is,” “I speculate that, “My judgment is,” “The fact is.” Using such language not only is a reminder to myself that I’m speaking a thought that others will see through their filters, it is also telling others that I am not speaking a fact. In it’s own way, it keeps me honest.

So, I might ask you these questions. Do you believe your thoughts? What authority do you give them? Where does that authority come from? Is it external or internal? If ever a self-berating thought arises, you might consider asking yourself, “What if this is not true?”

Dr. John Prendergast, author of *In Touch*, says, “Thinking in itself is not the problem. We often need to think—the clearer, the better. The problem arises when we believe our thoughts and *identify* with our thinking. We let our thoughts define and confine us and, by extension, everyone and everything else. When we believe our judgmental thoughts, we are in prison. When we confuse thinking with reality, we suffer. We then radiate our suffering out to others.

While some thoughts are more accurate than others, none are ultimately true; they are symbolic representations of our experience. When we begin to realize that awareness is distinct from thought, attention becomes more spacious and free.”

To conclude

In working with thoughts and thinking during meditation or anytime throughout the day, we are not trying to understand why we are thinking what we are thinking. And as nothing needs to be solved or resolved, we are not trying to fix anything. We are simply knowing that we have a thought or that we are thinking. If there is something underneath that like an emotion, we shift our attention to experience that fully. We are simply to have the direct experience of whatever is present in the moment without judgment or comment allowing wisdom to arise from that awareness so we can respond in a skillful way. From teacher, U Tejaniya, “Don’t feel disturbed by the thinking mind. You are not practicing to prevent thinking; but rather to recognize and acknowledge thinking whenever it arises.”

1. Thoughts simply happen all the time. We do not cause them. We do not will them. We cannot control which thoughts enter or exit our mind. And if you doubt that, just sit for 30 seconds and try to control what thoughts enter or exit your mind.
2. While we cannot control what thoughts enter our mind, we do have control over what we do with those thoughts once we become aware of them. A thought remains nothing more than a thought unless we identify with it and make it into a story. We have a lot of power if we are aware enough to simply notice the thought and acknowledge (without judgment) that, “That’s a thought.” Thoughts generally don’t stick around unless we give them fuel with our identifying with it or making it a thought that

defines who we are. This awareness allows us to respond in skillful ways as compared to reacting out of past conditioning. The sooner we recognize that a thought has entered our mind, the easier it is to not get caught by it.

3. Where do thoughts come from? What I have grown to see is that thoughts enter our minds at random on their own time based on past conditioning. As things happen in our lives, thoughts arise out of our extensive background and experience and from what is stored in our store consciousness. Our thoughts, good or bad, are not our fault. It is wasted energy to try to figure out why thoughts appear. Wise effort leads us to know how to work with them.

4. Part of the reason thoughts/thinking become a problem is because we resist them, and we judge them as bad and as something we should get rid of or at least try to get rid of. Resisting rather than embracing is like adding gasoline to a fire. What we resist will persist.

5. Thoughts, in and of themselves, do not tell us who we are. We are not our thoughts. Our thoughts do not define us, that is, unless we identify with them and allow them to define us. Our thoughts are not us.

6. For those of us who “note” our experience while sitting, words that can be used when noting thoughts/thinking might include, “thought,” “thinking,” “past,” “future,” “grasping,” “aversive,” “planning,” “remembering,” etc.

One more quote from Gil Fronsdal from the Insight Meditation Center in Redwood City, California – “Keep it simple. If this all seems too complicated; just come back to the breathing, and at some point the thinking will stand out that you will steer your attention to it. You can forget the instructions until thinking comes to your door.” And I might add, working with thoughts/thinking can be a good time to offer compassion to ourselves.

Quote from Jack Kornfield (Spirit Rock Meditation Center, Woodacre, CA)

“When you notice your thoughts, you are not so apt to get on the train and get involved. It is hard to see the thoughts and not identify with them. Many of us identify with our thoughts. Have you noticed how if your opinions change, you also change and you are a different person. We believe our body and our feelings to be ourselves, and now we see our thoughts as ourselves as well; but, *they are simply thoughts*.

Most of the deepest wisdom from meditation comes without thought. For example, you may be sitting and a desire arises; but upon being with it, you notice that it is also painful. Or some beautiful thing arises, and then you see some hoping that it would stay (clinging/grasping); and then you see that it maybe was not in it’s nature to stay. Deeper things come without the thought. And this is not to dismiss the value of thought and thinking. We are learning a kind of understanding or way of perceiving that does not involve so much thought; but rather a more direct experience.

And what we see when meditation gets really still, we see the witnessing, and we see that the witnessing is also not me or self; and you begin to see that you are nothing, and seeing that you

are nothing, you are seeing that you are everything.

The goal is to be with what is present with wisdom and compassion and freedom rather than with grasping and identification.

Another interesting thought from Jack. “Possibly a reason people think so much is that of fear—fear of being quiet.” Thinking gives us something to do. An interesting thought!

May we all be free from being caught by our thoughts and thinking.

Homework

1. Sit (Experiential Knowledge)

Aim to meditate 6 out of 7 days for an amount of time that works for you. Consider increasing the time you sit by 5 minutes or so. Include mindfulness of the breath, body sensations, sounds, feelings/emotions and thoughts/thinking—include/integrate it all.

2. Study (Intellectual/Cognitive Knowledge)

Read/Review Chapter 4 as it meets your needs

Read Chapter 5, “Simply Being Present With Walking Meditation” which will be sent to you next week.

3. Integrate (Daily Life Practice) (Experiential Knowledge) Pick and choose – Simply stay awake!

- Every day continue to PAUSE as many times as you remember to take a few breaths and “check in” with yourself. Integrate all that we’ve played with over the past chapters—awareness of your breath, body sensations, feelings/emotions, and thoughts/thinking.
 - Awareness of your body when feeling both difficult and positive feelings/emotions
 - Notice intuitive hunches/gut feelings
 - Notice your body when you are having conversations with friends
 - Awareness of when a thought turns into thinking
 - Awareness of fact vs thought
 - Awareness of the use of words such as “should,” “why,” “but,” “disagree”
 - Conscious use of RRain
 - Notice 1st and 2nd arrows (pain and/or suffering)
 - Notice if you have created any self identities
 - Notice any situation where you are reminded of impermanence
 - Notice awareness at the sense door level—just see, hear, touch, taste
- Last week I gave this assignment that was given to me from my teachers at the Vermont Insight Meditation Center – from teachers Claire Stanley and Jack Millett. Here it is again – it is to

simply STOP and PAUSE and continue the check in as presented in the previous paragraph. The exercise works specifically with emotions, and you now might consider applying it to thoughts/thinking or any situation that comes up during mindful moments.

“Over the next two weeks, work with awareness of the strong emotions that rise up like waves in the midst of your life. When you become aware of a wave of emotion, pause and take a few minutes to breathe and to connect with the body. If you can, then and there, take a moment to recognize what you are feeling. That may be all that you can do in that moment. Just pausing, taking a breath, and then connecting with the body and naming what the emotion is that is in your heart and mind in the moment.

If you feel relatively centered and think you have the time and space to go further, invite the energy of allowing or accepting what is happening in terms of this wave of emotion. If you can feel the emotion as it is manifesting in your body (is it mostly in your shoulders, in your belly, in your throat, or elsewhere?), you will be investigating this emotion in terms of Buddhist practice. This is not about the story of the emotion, it is about how it feels and how it is manifesting right now.

Finally perhaps not right then in the moment, but later in the day or a few days later, you might be able to look back on that experience and to see how it has changed over time. You can then let go of the impact of that emotion and not identify with it. You will be able to see from a distance how this emotion arose and then changed and perhaps has completely gone away. It is not self manifesting in your life.

Finally, take a moment to recognize that all human beings have this same experience of emotions arising and passing. Recognize the common humanity of this experience and let it go.”

Processing What We Learned in Chapters 1, 2, 3 (Parts I, II, III), 4

Using only words or phrases, take a few moments to jot down your mindfulness experiences over the past week. We will use this for checking in at the beginning of class.

Your mindfulness experiences:

- Awareness of your body when feeling both difficult and positive feelings/emotions
- Notice intuitive hunches/gut feelings
- Notice your body when you are having conversations with friends
- Awareness of when a thought turns into thinking
- Awareness of fact vs thought
- Awareness of the use of words such as “should,” “why,” “but,” “disagree”
- Conscious use of RRAIN
- Notice 1st and 2nd arrows (pain and/or suffering)
- Notice if you have created any self identities
- Notice any situation where you are reminded of impermanence
- Notice awareness at the sense door level—just see, hear, touch, taste

What questions do you have?