

Good at Thinking

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In one way, we're very good at thinking: We can think all day long—and think nothing of it. It seems like the most normal and natural thing for the mind to do. But in another way, we're not very good at thinking, because so many times our thoughts make us suffer. People can even kill themselves over the issues that their thinking brings up. And even if your thoughts don't lead you to the point of despair, they can just drive you crazy, like a dog that barks at nothing all night long. It doesn't accomplish anything; it's a waste of time and effort.

So when we're meditating, one of the purposes is to get so that we really *are* good at thinking—in other words, thinking when it's useful and resting when it's not. So first you want to think about how important it is to be able to rest. Give the mind a chance, so that it doesn't have to keep churning its wheels all the time. Think about how nice that would be. This is called a useful, beneficial use of your thinking. And then think about ways that you *could* get the mind to settle down. Again, this is another useful use of thinking.

For instance, you can keep the breath in mind. Just keep reminding yourself, "Stay with the breath. Be sensitive to the breath." That kind of thinking is called mindfulness, and it's very useful.

You want to couple it with alertness, which is watching the breath, noticing how the breath feels. When it doesn't feel good, you can change it. You don't have to put too much pressure on it to change. Just think, "Try longer breathing," and see what happens. See how the body responds. Or think, "Try shorter breathing." See what happens. Then "deeper," "more shallow," "faster," "slower," "heavier," "lighter"... Experiment with the breath for a while, to see how it feels, what feels best.

If you find the mind slipping off, just bring it right back. And try to get the breath more comfortable, as a way of getting the mind more interested in the breath again. This combination of mindfulness and alertness is a skillful use of thinking. As with any skill, it takes a while to master, so don't be upset if you can't do it right away. It's like playing the piano: Very few people can sit down at the piano for the first time and play Mozart. Most of us have to work with the scales. When we begin, it doesn't sound all that good, but after a while we begin to develop the muscles in our fingers, and we also begin to develop the ability to listen: to see what sounds good, what doesn't sound good.

So be patient. Just keep at it. And over time, you get more and more skilled in this skillful use of your thinking—the purpose of which is to get the mind to quiet down. And no matter whatever interesting thoughts, fascinating thoughts, or important-seeming thoughts may come up in the mind as you try to get it to calm down, you don't have to pay them any attention. You can think those thoughts any other time. Right now is a good time to practice this new skill: the skill of bringing the mind to stillness, to oneness. And it takes thought—mindful thought—combined with alertness, to

get the mind to settle down and be still.

As these skills get stronger, the Buddha changes the names he gives to them. He calls them *directed thought* and *evaluation*. In other words, you *really* are focused on what you're doing. All your thinking relates to the breath, and then you evaluate with more and more skill what really feels best right now—not only in terms of the breath, but also in terms of the pressure of your focus. Sometimes you can bear down too heavily on the breath, so that everything in the body feels confined and clamped down. That's not good. Or if your focus is too light, it just floats away. That's not good either. You want the amount of pressure to be just right. The classic simile is of trying to hold a baby chick in your hands: If you squeeze it too tight, it dies. If you hold it too loosely, it flies away.

So again, through practice you begin to get a sense of how much pressure is too much pressure, how much is too little, and exactly where is just right—remembering that “just right” may change with circumstances. That's something you learn through experience. The basic principle is always the same: Keep directing your thoughts to this one thing, and then evaluate to see how it's going, making adjustments wherever necessary. This is how you use thinking in order to get the mind to rest from its thinking. Because there *will* come a point where the breath feels good enough, everything feels settled within the body, and you can just let your awareness become one with the breath. You can drop all that evaluation. You don't have to keep reminding yourself to stay with the breath, because you're right there. That's when the mind gets really focused on its object: It seems like the breath permeates your awareness; your awareness permeates the breath. You feel solid and at home, and everything feels just right.

Some people will tell you, though, that after you've brought the mind to this state of broad, open awareness—*one* in the present moment—you can trust whatever comes up in the mind, whatever insights arise. The Buddha never taught that way, though. He said that you have to put these things to the test. You start by learning to ask the right questions. This is a quality that the texts call *yoniso manasikara*: appropriate attention. After all, once the mind is still, and you come out of that stillness, you could focus in on anything at all with your improved powers of concentration. Or if it so happens that an interesting idea or insight comes popping into your mind when the mind is still, it's very easy to latch to it, saying, “Oh, this must really be true, because it comes out of the stillness.” But the Buddha said you can't be so sure.

This is why you want to direct your attention in the right direction, which is to watch whatever comes up in the mind as an event, as part as a causal process: “When *this* thought comes up, where does it lead? When *that* thought comes up, where does it lead? Does it lead you where you want to go? Or, if you believe this particular thought, where would it lead you? If you believe the opposite, where would it lead you? What difference would it make?” There are a lot of thoughts that just don't make any difference at all in how you conduct your life. As the Buddha said, the big question in life is, “What are you doing that's causing suffering? Can you learn how to stop?” Other questions can carry

you away to abstractions: “Where does the world come from? Are there deities out there that can help you? Is the world finite? Is it infinite? Is it eternal? Is it not eternal?” For most religions, most teachings, those are the big questions: “What am I? Who am I? Who made me? What is the meaning of my life?” The Buddha said you can never come to the end trying to answer those questions. He called them a thicket of views, a wilderness of views: You just get lost.

But there is one question that you *can* answer, that you can find a solution for, and that really makes a difference. That’s, “Why are you suffering? Why *is* there suffering?” Wisdom, the Buddha says, comes from learning to ask the question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” Now, this may seem selfish, focusing on your own happiness, but true happiness, long-term happiness, can’t rely on the suffering of other people. If it did, they would be doing everything they could to stop it, and it wouldn’t last very long. So that’s one of the first things you have to realize about long-term welfare and happiness: It has to depend on the welfare and happiness of other people, too. That way, they won’t harm it.

But this question is wise also because it comes from the realization that long-term happiness is going to depend on your actions. You can’t blame your happiness or sorrow on other people. It’s not that you blame them on yourself—the world *blame* is not appropriate here—you simply try to figure out where these things come from, so that you can solve the problem. So instead of saying that, “I’m to blame,” you say, “What mental states are to blame?” The mind has all kinds of mental states: There’s mindfulness, and there’s lack of mindfulness. There’s sensual desire, ill-will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty, which are all things that get in the way, that cause you to do unskillful things. On a deeper level, passion, aversion, and delusion: These are the qualities of the mind that cause you to do unskillful things. But there are also times in the mind when there’s no passion, no aversion, no delusion—everything is very clear. And in times like that, you tend to act in skillful ways.

So it’s not an issue of, “You are a bad person causing suffering.” It’s just that some of your thoughts, some of the qualities in your mind, cause suffering. Other qualities *don’t* cause suffering. You’ve got to learn how to sort them out. And a still mind is the best place to do that. The more you can resist the pull of thoughts, the easier it is to see them for what they are. Most of us are like someone who’s standing by the side of the road: Somebody drives up on a motorcycle and says, “Hop on!” So you hop on and go. And only then do you stop to ask, “Who are you? Where are you taking me? Are you a Hell’s Angel? Who are you?” And by that time, it’s too late. If it really is a Hell’s Angel, you’re in big trouble. You want to be confident enough in where you’re standing, so that when someone drives up on a motorcycle and says, “Hop on,” you can say, “Why? Who are you? I’m not going to go with you unless you explain a lot of things. Where are you going to take me?” Then, if you get good answers, and the motorcycle driver seems honest and trustworthy, you can hop on.

In other words, there *are* patterns of thoughts that are helpful. It’s not that we’re trying to snuff out thought forever. The Buddha never said that “Thinking is suffering; therefore, stop thinking.” He never

said that. He said that *clinging* is suffering. We hold onto things with the hope that they'll give us true happiness, and yet they don't. But if you can put the mind in a position where it doesn't have to cling—where it can use things simply as tools and then put them down when they've succeeded in their intended purpose—then you don't have to suffer.

So we get the mind still so that we can understand its thinking enough to sort it out. This is called analysis of qualities—that's the technical term. What it literally means is that you look at what's coming up in the mind, and you decide whether it's going to be skillful or not. You see clearly: If it's skillful, it's going to lead to true happiness; if it's unskillful, it's going to lead you in the other direction. And then you can make your choice.

So it's not that thinking is bad. It's just that some thinking leads to suffering and other thinking doesn't. We want to put ourselves in a position where we can see clearly which is which. That's why we're working on getting the mind still right now—because it's only through getting the mind still that you can put it into that position: the position where it can see things clearly for what they are, where it can ask the questions that are really useful to ask, and get clear answers—answers that'll make a difference in our lives, that lead us along the path to true happiness. Along the way, even though we may not be all the way there yet, at least we find that we *are* getting more skillful in how we use our minds. It's not that we're trying to figure out abstract problems, but we see more clearly what we're doing and what the results are going to be, so we can choose more wisely. The Buddha said this was what wisdom is all about: There are things that you like to do, but you know they're going to cause harm, and so you learn not to do them. There are things that you *don't* like to do, that you know will cause happiness, and you figure out ways to get yourself to do them. As for the things that cause harm and you don't like to do: those are no-brainers. The same with things that you like to do that will cause happiness: those are no-brainers, too. It's those other two: They're the problems. But if you approach them strategically, developing insight, developing the proper sense of values, developing appropriate attention—learning how to look at your life in a way that asks the proper questions and gets you to act in skillful ways—that's what real wisdom is all about. It really *does* make a difference in how you live.

So this is why this skill of bringing the mind to stillness is so important: because it puts you in a position where you can develop the skill of thinking to the full.