When to Think

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An important part of the path is knowing when to think and when not to think. Right concentration starts out with thinking. Directed thought and evaluation are the two basic factors. Require that you think. Directed thought is thinking of. Evaluation is thinking about. In other words, directed thought focuses your attention on one topic. It’s the factor that’s developed from mindfulness, reminding yourself to stay with the breath, stay with the breath, stay with the breath. Don’t go wandering off. Come back to the breath. It keeps pointing you to the breath. Evaluation is the factor that examines the breath, that looks at the breath for long periods of time and notices things about it, whether it’s comfortable or not, whether it could be longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow, and then testing out those hypotheses. Once a comfortable breath has arrived at, then you think of spreading it throughout the body. There’s that element of willing in there, too. When the Buddha describes breath meditation, he starts out with telling you to be aware of long breathing, aware of short breathing, and then he says from that point on you start training yourself to relate to the breath in various ways. You train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe in. You train yourself to be aware of the whole body as you breathe out. You have to will this. It takes effort. So these are areas where thinking is involved. But it’s a particular type of thinking. It’s trained thinking, thinking within certain circumscribed limits. You don’t think about the breath in ways that will distract you from the present moment. You limit your thinking to ways that keep you with the breath. Basically, any thinking that helps you stay with the breath and be sensitive to the breath is useful thinking. When you look at the Buddha’s instructions on how to deal with distractions, sometimes it involves simply noting the fact that you’ve wandered off, and that’s enough to bring you back. Other times you have to think more actively. In other words, if you see yourself wandering off to a particular topic repeatedly, he instructs you to contemplate the drawbacks of that topic. This requires active thinking. If you think about that topic, where is it going to take you? What kind of actions would it lead to? Where does that particular movie take you? Where does it end? How many times have you seen that particular movie in your mind? Why do you need to look at it again? Think of a dog chewing on an old bone to the point where there’s no meat left, and the only taste it gets is the taste of its own saliva. That’s what a lot of our thinking is like. If you can think, use that analogy to remind yourself of these patterns in the mind. It makes it easier to get back to the breath. That’s a useful, skillful use of your thinking powers. Or you can remind yourself that it’s actually easier to stay with the breath than it is to think up a whole thought world. The world of the breath is already there. All you have to do is pay attention. The past and future require that you create them, and in creating them there have to be patterns of tension in the body to maintain that particular thought world. When you can sense where that pattern of tension is in the body, you breathe through it and then come back to the breath. There are aspects of concentration practice which require thinking. The thinking that pulls you away from particular unskillful thoughts, distracted thoughts. The kind of thinking that can counteract those distracting thoughts. In other words, when you’re feeling discouraged in the practice, you think of the Buddha. You think of the Sangha. Think of all the people in the past who’ve been facing problems more difficult than yours, both on the external level and on the internal level. Yet somehow they manage to pull themselves together and overcome those problems and become noble disciples. Sometimes we read about the Buddha and he seems too perfect from the very beginning. But you read about the members of the Sangha and it’s easier to see their faults. It makes them easier to relate to and take them as encouragement. Or you can think of the Buddha and think of your own goodness in the past. We all have some goodness in terms of our generosity, in terms of our virtue. Think of your own goodness and realize that you’ve got that foundation, your need for the practice, that gives you encouragement to get you back on the path. If anger is a problem, you can counteract it with thoughts of metta. If lust is a problem, you can counteract it with contemplating the unattractiveness of the body. Think about how all human bodies are like in terms of the various organs they have inside, starting with yours and then going out to everybody else in the room, everybody else in the world. It’s all basically the same. The livers are pretty much the same. The stomachs are pretty much the same. The contents of the intestines are pretty much the same. You realize that your lust for a particular body is based on ignoring an awful lot of what’s there in the body. When you’re more open to the total reality of those bodies, not only does it free you from the lust, but also there’s a greater sense of openness that comes along with it. You don’t have to keep denying things. You don’t have to keep pretending that they’re not there. You can think in these ways, and it’s easier to get back to the breath. If complacency is your problem, contemplate death. Death can come at any time. They keep predicting that big earthquake that could hit here at any time, even though this building was built according to the building code. You never know how strong an earthquake might be and what weird vibrations it might set up. The whole thing could come collapsing down on us. Or, instead of death coming from outside, it might come from within your own body. The body is designed to die. All kinds of things could go wrong unexpectedly, quickly. Think of all the people who died yesterday who, yesterday morning, had no idea that it was going to be their last day. Well, someday that’s going to be our day. Are you ready to go? What you think about death, not to make yourself depressed, but in order to encourage you to do the work that has to be done. Use that thinking to get yourself back to the breath. Then, once you’re with the breath, you use your factors of direct thought and evaluation to make the breath more comfortable, to use the breath sensation so it’s easier to settle down. It’s a more comfortable place to be right here. Developing that sense of the whole body breathing in, the whole body breathing out, and whatever sense of ease and fullness and refreshment you can gain from the breath. Think of that seeping through the body, the way oil will seep through a pile of stones. The more oil there is, finally, this whole pile of stones becomes not a dry pile of stones, but a thoroughly saturated with oil pile of stones. The stones begin to dissolve. It’s probably screwy chemistry, but think of it that way, because that’s what the body feels. This nice sensation of rapture can seep through the body, filling up this little space here, this little space there, and as they all begin to connect, the spaces that weren’t easy to seep through in the beginning become softer and softer until they get saturated as well. The Buddha talks about this, that sense of ease and rapture that come from seclusion, when the mind is secluded from all those distracting thoughts. You’re just with the body in the present moment, not pushing it into the future, just willing to sit with it right here. A sense of fullness arises. Then you think of it saturating throughout the body, spreading throughout the body. He gives the image of a bathman taking a ball of powder and working moisture into it. A more modern image would be of a person making bread, mixing the liquid in with the flour so that the whole ball of dough is saturated with the liquid, and yet it doesn’t drip outside. This is all a process of thinking and evaluation. You’re trying to get yourself with the breath, get the breath throughout the body, get your awareness to fill the whole body. There comes a point, though, where everything is saturated as much as it can be done. John Furon gave the image of a jar full of water. You pour water into the jar until it’s full. If you keep on trying to pour more water in, the water just flows out. The jar is as full as it can be. At that point, you stop trying to pour more water in and just be there with the jar. In other words, once that sense of rapture and pleasure permeates the body, you can drop your directed thought and evaluation and just be with the breath. There’s a sense of the awareness of the breath and the breath itself becoming one. It’s not you out here looking at the breath in there, but you’re totally immersed in the breath, one with the breath. You don’t have to evaluate it anymore. You don’t have to keep directing your thought there because you’re there. The breath is just fine as it is, so you just allow yourself to melt into it and be one with it. At this point, there’s simply the mindfulness of the breath without much thinking, hardly any thinking at all. It’s just a labeling that goes on, “Breath, breath, full,” or whatever, but nothing more complex than that, nothing more active than that. As you sit there with the breath, you may begin to think. A vagrant thought may come into mind, “This is dumb.” So your next thought should be, “No, it’s not dumb. This is good for the mind. It’s healing for the mind.” The internal version of those Ayurvedic treatments where they drip oil on your forehead and you just lie there for an hour doing nothing but having oil dripped on your forehead. In other words, it’s a steady and gradual healing process that goes on as the mind is allowed to be in this full body state without you having to do any analysis at all. This is where our active mind starts getting impatient. Something within us wants to go on to the next step. “Oh, could we know this already? What’s next?” Well, you have to let this state do its work on the mind and on the body. You have to allow it to be here continually. Learn how to let go of the impatience that wants to push on to the next thing. Let go of the thoughts of boredom, thoughts that this is mindless, all those other thoughts. This is the place where you have to stand in order to withstand that constant active, active, active side of the mind. We all want awakening very fast, and we’re willing to believe whatever people tell us that’s negative about these states of concentration. “Oh, we’ve done concentration already. Let’s move on to the next thing. Let’s go on to insight after all. Insight is where all the action is.” No, it’s not. The Buddha said the heart of the noble path is right concentration. Here you are. You’ve got to get this factor really solid so it’s not knocked away by anything. I mean, if these little vagrant thoughts can knock you off this concentration, imagine what else could knock you off. It’s still not solid enough to serve as a basis for right concentration. You have to be here, be here, be here for long periods of time. You don’t have to be afraid of being attached or clinging to this, because of course you will cling to this. It’s a good attachment. As I said this afternoon, it’s like climbing a ladder. If you’re going to let go of the lower rung, you have to hold on tight to a higher rung. This is where you hold on in order to let go of sensual attachments, to let go of all the hindrances. So of course you’ve got to hold on tight here, because it’s a really nice place to be. Just as long as you don’t listen to those vagrant voices in the mind that get impatient. You want to have fast results so you can go back and live the rest of your life. This is the basis for any kind of happiness you’re going to find in life. So give it a chance to develop. Give it a chance to grow, because this state of concentration does mature as the body gets more and more accustomed to being here. It works imperceptible changes in the mind. It makes you more grounded, more solid. Think of it as learning how to feed. In the past you’ve been feeding on junk food. Well, this is health food, and it takes a while of eating health food to work the junk out of your system. So give this a chance. Give concentration a chance to see what it can do without your being impatient to go on to the next step, without your trying to push the issue. Some things can’t be pushed. It’s like growing rice. The rice plants have to grow at their own rate. If you want them to grow faster, you give them more fertilizer, you water them properly. But there’s only so fast that they can grow. If you pull on them to make them grow faster, what happens? Well, the roots get pulled out of the ground, and that’s it. You’ve got a dead plant. There’s something organic about right concentration. It needs time. So don’t be afraid of being stuck here. Don’t be afraid of being stuck here. Don’t be afraid of being mindless. When you get into this state of pleasure and rapture that don’t require direct thought or evaluation, allow it to grow. This much is enough for awakening, a basis for awakening. But it’s got to be given a chance to do its work on the mind before it can have that revolutionary sort of influence. John Fung once classified people in the world into two types, the people who tend to think too much and the people who don’t think enough. The ones who don’t think enough, those are the ones who have to be kicked out of right concentration in order to think and analyze. But for the most part, most of the people I’ve seen here in America are the type who think too much, at least the ones who come into practice. In which case, the active side of the mind is already well-developed. It’s the ability to sit and allow concentration to develop. That’s the talent that you have to work on. When things are fully developed, you won’t have to tell the mind to analyze. It already has an analyzing talent. It’ll apply that to the concentration. But in the meantime, you’ve got to give it a good, solid concentration to work with. So let it stay right here. If it’s not yet right here, put whatever effort is needed into getting it to stay right here. Make it right effort, in other words, not an effort that destroys the concentration, but an effort that’s just right, which requires patience, which requires being observant. It requires a lot of us, especially for those of us who tend to think too much. We often like to take the easier way out. This is what people who think a lot tend to do. They want to look for the easier way out. They say, “Well, let’s just skip over the concentration and go straight for insight.” It doesn’t work that way. The central factor of the path is right concentration. So if it requires a lot of work, it’s worth the work. If it requires a lot of time, it’s worth the time. Use whatever skills you have in sticking with it. All too often, the problem of being brought up in the type of education system we have here in the West is that we’re taught to focus on the things we’re good at and let other people be good at the things we’re not good at. As a result, we don’t learn the skills we need in order to become skilled at things that we don’t have a lot of talent for. But we do have those potentials. Learn how to develop them. Think of something you’ve learned to do in the past that you didn’t do well right from the very beginning, but after, with time and effort and patience, you became more and more skilled. Then apply those same skills, that same ability to encourage yourself, that same ability to pick yourself up and dust yourself off when you fall flat on your face, that same ability to cut these large tasks down into smaller ones. Apply that to the concentration. When you can do that, you find that thinking, the thinking that’s needed to get into concentration, is well-thought. The effort for that thinking is well-spent. And you find also that the concentration itself, once you get there and get used to being with it, learning when to think, learning when not to think, is one of the most valuable skills you can master. After all, it’s the basis of everything. It’s the basis that allows ordinary discernment to develop into transcendent discernment. So give it a chance to do its work.

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