People Who Think Too Much

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Chan Phuong once said that meditators tend to fall into two classes, people who don’t think enough and people who think too much. Most people here in the West fall into that second class. He said people who fall into this class have to learn how to stay really, really still. They’ve already got the side of the mind that likes to ask questions, but all too often they see something a little bit, assume that they’ve understood, and then they move on. As a result, they know a lot of little bits and pieces about a lot of things, but they don’t know any one thing in a lot of depth. So in order to know the mind in depth, you have to be willing to sit with one thing for a while, like the breath. You can stay with the breath a little bit, and there’s a tendency to ask, “Okay, now I’ve seen the breath. What’s next?” Go back and look at the breath again and again and again. Learn how to bring the mind to stillness and lots of different situations, and learn how to keep it in stillness for lots of different situations. Then you really begin to know the breath, and you really begin to know the mind. You can’t really see the movements of the mind unless you have one place of reference. So you want to get that place of reference really solid, and it’s important to do that. Until you have a solid point of reference, you can’t really be sure about your observations. It’s like sitting in a train, in a train station. You look across into the other train right next to you, and you see that it seems to be moving, but you’re not sure. Maybe you’re moving. You can’t really know, because each of the trains is capable of moving. You want to see something that’s really solid. If there’s a post that goes past, then you know, “Okay, you’re moving,” because you know the post is fixed to the ground. The movements of the mind are a lot more complex than trains and railroad stations. All kinds of movements are going on. Some of them are intentional, and some of them are the result of old intentions. In other words, they’re past karma. One of the important things in the meditation is to learn how to see the difference. But you can’t do it just by making an observation once or twice. You have to be willing to sit still long periods of time. Stay with one intention, which is the intention to stay with the breath in the present moment. Make it comfortable. And that becomes your post. Then, after a while, you’ll see other movements in the mind. Some of them will be other intentions that come sneaking in. Others will just be plain movements. And you really won’t know which is which unless you’ve stayed with your main intention for long periods of time and seen it in different contexts. So when you’re told to come back to the breath, come back to the breath, come back to the breath, it’s not that you’re being told not to question and not be curious. It’s just that you’re being told to put yourself in a situation where you really can observe for yourself and be willing to check your observations. Especially as the concentration gets more and more subtle, more and more solid, you’ll be able to see things you didn’t see before. So it’s not that you’re told not to think. It’s that you’re told to put certain questions aside for the time being until you put yourself in a position where you really can observe them. And then you can check your observations. Another thing that John Funk said was that there are basically three steps to the concentration practice. One is learning how to do it, the second is learning how to maintain it, and the third is learning how to put it to use. So simply getting the mind to settle down with the breath for a little while isn’t enough. You have to learn how to get it to stay there for long periods of time. And then when you get up from meditation, learn how to maintain it, like a bowl filled with oil placed on top of your head. When you get up from meditation, don’t let it tip over. Try to keep that sense of concentration balanced inside. As you move around, you’re going to learn an awful lot about concentration in the process. The more you can maintain it in different situations, the more you learn about it. The more you learn how to put it to use, the more you learn about it. Not only the concentration, but also all the other movements in the mind. You’ll see which movements distract or destroy the concentration and which ones don’t. And then you try to figure out how to keep the concentration so it doesn’t get destroyed. To do that, it’s not only a matter of sheer willpower, but there’s an element of understanding as well. Try to notice what it is that starts your concentration to unravel. What things are coming from inside? What things are coming from outside? Then you learn how to use that state of concentration to unravel unskillful mental states. So you’ve learned how to develop a sense of ease and fullness with the breath. How can you use that fullness, that sense of fullness? How can you use that sense of ease to counteract irritation? How can you use that sense of ease to dissolve any sense of tension and tightness that can come up with any kind of defilement? I was reading in a book today that said, “Tranquility is good simply to get the mind concentrated.” But the Buddha never said that. He said, “Tranquility actually can do away with passion, whereas insight does away with ignorance.” And you need both to cut through your defilements. So learn how to put them both to use. It’s through this process of doing the concentration, maintaining it, and putting it to use that you really get to understand it and you really get to understand the mind. Concentration isn’t just for stilling; it’s also for understanding. Right concentration includes both tranquility and insight. Tranquility is, as the Buddha said, the process of settling in. Insight is how you look at your concentration, how you look at your states of mind in terms of the process of fabrication. And you need both tranquility and insight in order to get the mind to settle down to deeper levels where it’s really useful and to cut through your defilements. For those of us who think too much, the tranquility side is the one we really have to stress, because we’re the type of people who tend to assume we understand something and we get bored with it and want to move on. But if you look, say, at the history of science, it’s not the question that people look at different worlds and come up with different theories. It’s the same world over and over again. It’s just that they have to go back and look more carefully at their basic assumptions, the things they thought they understood. So they have to go back and look again and look again and look again. Sometimes we’re too clever for our own good. As Ajaan Lee says, sometimes you have to be willing to be stupid to admit that you don’t know. But the way to cure your stupidity, to cure your ignorance, is to be willing to go back and look again. So the best way to do this is to give yourself something to look again and again at, which is what the centered state of mind, when you keep it with a breath, provides. So it’s important that you learn how to admit that you don’t know about something, but you don’t just stay there with the “don’t know” attitude. You look again so that you can learn. It’s like walking back and forth on a path. It’s the same path you walk back and forth many, many, many times. And if you’re not observant, you get bored. If you’re observant, you begin to see that there are still lots of things that you can learn about the path. So be willing to walk back and forth on this path, on this spot where the body and the mind meet at the breath. And always be open to the possibility that there’s something new to see each time the breath comes in. And each time the breath goes out.

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