Skillful Thinking

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We often think of meditation as being a process of not thinking. But to get the mind to settle down, you have to think. A lot of the Buddha’s meditation instructions involve teaching us how to think in a way that’s useful, in a way that’s helpful. We may think, “Well, we know how to think perfectly well, thank you.” But if your thinking causes suffering, if it causes harm, then no matter how clever it is, you still don’t know how to think. The Buddha points out the ways to think, the questions to ask, that will make your thinking useful, helpful. It’s a skillful part of the path to the end of suffering, rather than the cause of suffering. And you notice in his instructions on right concentration, the first jhana has direct thought and evaluation. In other words, he teaches you where to focus your thoughts, and he gives you instruction on how to evaluate. Here you direct your thoughts to the breath, the sensation of breathing in the body. Try to broaden your concept of the breathing so it’s not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but it’s the whole energy flow in the body. It’s part of what’s called the wind element, which includes the in-and-out breath, and it also includes other energies in the body. The up-flowing winds, the down-flowing winds. In other words, the energy that seems to flow up through the body sometimes, and then there’s an energy that flows down from the top of the head down to the soles of the feet. If the energy flows up too much, you start getting headaches. If it flows down too much, the body slumps down. You get sleepy. So you have to find a way of balancing these two energies. There’s the energy in the stomach, the energy in the intestines, and then there’s the energy that flows throughout the entire body. This is probably one of the most interesting parts of the wind element in the body, the energy that keeps your nerves working, the energy that keeps the blood flowing through the different parts of the body. You might want to make a survey as you settle down to focus on your breath. How is the energy flowing in your body right now? Go through the different parts. Check things out. Is there a blockage anywhere? Any place where you’re tensing up your muscles, blocking the blood flow? If you find it, think of breathing through it or breathing into it or breathing around it, any way that helps to dissolve the blockage. You may think of relaxing your hands, starting with your fingers and going up through the palms, the wrists, the arms. Start with your toes and go up through your feet, your ankles. Relax all the extremities. See what that does. That’s what the evaluation comes in. Does it feel good? If it provides an area where you can settle down and feel at home, then you’ve done it skillfully. If not, try it in other ways. The basic evaluation here is based on the Four Noble Truths. This is the Buddhist guideline for discernment. Actually, these guidelines go back even more simply than that, pointing out that there are actions that you may like to do. They give good results. Actions you may like to do, they give bad results. Actions you don’t like to do, they give good results. And actions you don’t like to do, they give bad results. The things you like to do and give good results, they’re no problem. The things that you don’t like to do and give bad results, they’re not a problem either. You don’t want to touch them. It’s those ones that you like to do that give bad results and don’t like to do but give good results. Those are the ones you’ve got to watch out for. And those are the ones that are a test for your wisdom, for your intelligence. Can you talk yourself into doing the things you don’t like to do but give good results? And can you talk yourself out of doing the things that you like to do but give bad results? In other words, wisdom is strategic. And the Buddha recommends that to get started on that, you go ask someone, someone who you like, “What sort of things will give bad results over the long term? What sort of things will give good results over the long term?” It’s from this framework that the Four Noble Truths come. Craving, ignorance, clinging—these are the things that give bad results and that we like to crave, we like to cling. Virtue, concentration, discernment, giving, giving good results. Sometimes we like these things and sometimes we don’t. But we’ve got to learn how to talk ourselves into pursuing the path. Part of that comes from understanding what these Four Noble Truths are. They’re suffering, and that’s something to be comprehended. In other words, you want to be able to watch it so you can understand what’s happening. What is suffering? Is it physical or is it mental? Look at it. Is it possible for there to be pain in the body and yet no suffering in the mind? That’s an important question. Exactly how do you experience the suffering? What is the experience of suffering? That’s something you need to comprehend. That’s for the cause of suffering. Once you’ve begun to comprehend suffering, you begin to see that there are other mental factors that go around it. When you detect those factors—things like craving, clinging, ignorance—you want to let them go. To be able to do this, you’ve got to develop good, strong qualities in the mind. Virtue, concentration, discernment—these are things you want to develop. Then when you see the craving passing away, that’s something you want to notice. You want to watch that and realize what’s happening. So there are four potential duties you’ve got here in the present moment, which means you’ve got to think. You’ve got to evaluate the situation. There’s an experience that comes from the breath and the way you breathe. Is it stressful or is it not? If it is stressful, what’s the problem here? Is the stress actually part of the path? Sometimes there is some stress in developing virtue, concentration, and discernment, in which case it’s going to give good results down the line. So it’s something you want to pursue for the time being. But if it’s not associated with any of those things, if it’s associated with craving and clinging, you better let it go. Better let go of the craving and clinging, but try to comprehend the stress first. So it’s a process of thinking and evaluating that goes along with the meditation. You can reduce this to pretty simple terms. You’re sitting here and breathing. Does it feel good? Does it not? If it’s not feeling good, can you figure out why? Can you change the way you breathe? Can you change the way you relate to the breath? That makes it more satisfying, more gratifying to be right here, just breathing in, breathing out. So you can ask yourself, “What kind of breathing would feel good right now?” Just pose that question in the moment. See how the body responds. When it’s got the green light to go for comfortable breathing, it’ll usually go in that direction. What stops it from breathing comfortably is your ignorance. In other words, you’re not looking at things in these terms. You’re looking in other terms, which may seem very clever, very intelligent, but it’s ignorance of the real issue at hand, which is what are you doing that’s causing suffering? Why are you doing it? Can you learn how to stop? That’s basic wisdom, basic discernment—learning how to ask those questions and putting other questions aside. So even though there are states of concentration where thinking is minimal, to get there, you’ve got to learn how to think. So this is why we don’t just sit here focusing on the breath without thinking at all. We have to understand the Buddhist teachings and see how they actually relate to what we’re doing right here, right now. That requires some humility. No matter how smart we are, we’ve been causing suffering, so we’re not really all that smart. We’ve got to learn how to look at our thinking in a new way, learn how to use our thinking in a new way, so that instead of being a cause of suffering, it helps bring suffering to an end. We’ve got to understand these different duties that go along with the Formidable Truths. There’s a story about Jokun Na, who was a famous monk in Bangkok, a meditator who, even though he lived in one of the most lavishly endowed monasteries in Bangkok, lived very simply. He had a little hut off in a corner. During the middle of the century, they brought electricity into the monastery, but he asked that his hut not have electricity. He lived very simply. One night he was doing walking meditation late at night, and a young monk came running up to him and said, “I can’t control my thoughts. I’ve just been worried about what I’m going to do. What can I do?” Jokun Na looked at him and said, “You’ve got your duties all mixed up.” He turned around and walked into his hut. Fortunately, the monk had studied some of the Buddhist teachings, and he knew the duties with regard to the Formidable Truths. He was developing something he should have been letting go. In other words, he was feeding all these unskillful thoughts. He should have been trying to comprehend what’s going on here, why is there suffering, and then seeing what he was doing that was causing that unskillful thinking and letting that go. Then the instructions worked. For most of us, those instructions would have gone right past us. But if you understand the Buddhist teachings and what it means to think wisely, then when you find your thinking running off in all directions at once, you’ve got to stop and ask yourself, “What is actually your duty here? What’s going on?” Start dividing things up in terms of the Formidable Truths, and then you’ll know what to do. Now, you may not be able to do it skillfully at the beginning, but you can’t let your impatience get in the way. I don’t know how many people have got problems with an addiction, some activity or craving that they just seem to can’t get control of, and they want it in an immediate end to the problem. It’s their impatience that got them into the problem to begin with. Impatience is not going to get them out. You work patiently at getting more and more skillful to figure out when to observe, when to analyze, when to rest and just watch, when to let go, when to develop. Be aware of meditation techniques that tell you just to let go, or just to note, or any “just” whatever. Concentration comes, well, just notice it passing, and then you’ve learned something about inconstancy. Well, yeah, but you haven’t gotten much use out of the concentration. The concentration is something to develop. Make sure you’ve got your duty straight. When you do, then you’re thinking. Thinking can be helpful. You know when to turn it on, when to turn it off, which direction to apply it. That’s when your thinking gets wise and part of the path.

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