Thinking & Objectifying

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When you meditate, you have to think, at least as you’re getting started. This is one of the reasons why we have chants at the beginning of the meditation session. It’s to get you thinking about the themes we chant about, to remind you why you’re here, to help strengthen your motivation and strengthen your understanding. Because meditation is not just a mechanical exercise where you force the mind with one technique. You use a technique, but you have to think about it. You have to be sensitive to the effect that the technique is having on the mind. And at the same time, you have to learn how to read your mind to see what needs to be done at any particular stage in the practice. There are times when you have to emphasize stillness. And if the mind refuses to be still, then you’ve got to probe and figure out why. If you just clamp down on it, it’ll be still for a while, but then it’ll rebel, just like a child. If you place a lot of rules and regulations on the child without any sensitivity, the child will start rebelling. So you have to look into what is it in the mind that rebels? Why is it not going to settle down? Is there a physical discomfort? Is there some issue in the mind? Is there something you haven’t sorted out? If there is, this is a good time to sort it out. See whether it’s anger over some event during the day, or some old event that comes bubbling up in the mind. There are two ways of dealing with it. One, you say, “I’m simply here to get the mind to settle down.” So once you’ve dealt with it enough to get the mind to settle down, then you put it aside and get back to the breath. Because if you’re going to go deeper with the issue, you have to create more stillness in the mind. So what this means is that you use your discernment together with your concentration. Or as the Buddha says, you develop insight and tranquility at the same time. Because you need both. They have to be balanced. If the mind is just totally stocked still without any discernment, nothing happens. On record, there are lots of people prior to the time of the Buddha who were able to get their mind into very strong states of concentration, but it wasn’t enough on its own to give rise to insight. As we all know, if you just sit around thinking and analyzing, the mind is not going to gain any insight. Thinking and analysis, no matter how right it is in terms of what’s written in the texts, if the mind doesn’t settle down and be still, it won’t open up to the analysis. You won’t see exactly how the analysis applies to what the mind is doing right here, right now, getting into the particulars. So it just kind of washes over the mind like water off a duck’s back. It doesn’t really penetrate. It doesn’t really create any change in the mind. So you have to learn how to balance the insight and the stillness. And that’s one of the questions you’ve got to keep in the back of your mind. That’s what it’s in my need right now. For most of us, the main issue is the stillness. John Fung has a comment that there are two kinds of meditators, those who think too much and those who don’t think enough. It’s interesting that there’s no third, i.e., the people who think just right. The thinking just right, that’s what you have to train yourself in. I say that most of us in the West tend to fall into the category of those who think too much. So we really have to emphasize the stillness. Both because it allows us to see things more clearly and also because it gives us a sense of well-being, a sense of inner worth, a little bit of pleasure and ease to throw to that part of the mind that wants immediate pleasure, immediate ease. Okay, here’s some. Take some with you. Something for you to feed on. It’s like you’re going down a path and you know there are dogs in the path, so you take a couple of sweets in your hand. So when the dogs come running at you, you throw them a few sweets and they eat the sweets and they’re happier. They don’t attack you. So it’s important to realize that thinking is, there are times when you want to put it aside as much as possible, but you do need to think to get the mind to settle down. Thought is part of the first jhana. The Buddha uses two different words for thinking. One is vittaka, just general thinking, and then there’s what’s called papanca. That’s the kind of thinking that causes trouble. That’s the kind of thinking that creates suffering. He says you start out with sensory contact, which is followed by feeling and perception, and then based on the perceptions, then you think. And then what you think about, then you tend to papanca. You tend to objectify. You turn at issues like, “Who am I? What is this world that I am living in? Do I exist? Do I not exist? Does the world exist? Can I feed on it? What can I gain from it?” Those kinds of issues attack you, and it’s the kind of thinking the Buddha tells you to avoid. But the kind of thinking that comes prior to that, which thinks largely in terms of, “Where is there stress? Where is there suffering? What can be done to minimize the stress?” That kind of thinking is a legitimate part of the practice. It’s what keeps you focused. It’s not that all thinking is bad. You simply have to learn how to use it properly and learn how to make a distinction between those two kinds of thought. So when you find that the mind has trouble settling down, as I said earlier today, you can ask yourself, “Who in here doesn’t want to settle down? What’s the reason?” It’s very useful to think of the mind as a committee. If you think, “I can’t settle down,” then you have this problem with who you are, and this sense of identification as the troubled mind or the disturbed mind. It actually becomes part of the problem. But if it’s a mind with lots of different wills and lots of different minds of its own, then you try to sort them out. Who in here is feeling rebellious today, and why? Just that ability to step back from these different thought identities gives you a little bit of space where you can look at the situation with more understanding, that you don’t just think, “Yes, there is the will to settle down, but there’s another will in here as well.” And if you can identify it and see where it’s coming from, then you can deal with it, straighten it out. That kind of thinking is vittaka, the kind of thinking that’s useful in the path. As for the thinking that says, “What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I do this?” You’re already thinking in terms of who you are and what kind of person you are. That kind of thinking is papanca, and that’s not part of the path. It actually gets in the way. As the Buddha says, that kind of thinking assails you, it attacks you, and creates problems. One way of getting around that kind of thinking is to remind yourself that whatever problems that come up in the meditation, you’re not the only one. Everybody who meditates has to deal with these issues, has dealt with these issues, will be dealing with these issues. So it’s not just you. Sometimes just that thought can help take a lot of the sting away and help clear the air so you can see precisely what’s going on, what is the thought pattern that’s getting in the way. As the mind begins to settle down, again, you don’t want to think too much at that point. Just let it settle in, settle in, settle in, until it’s really established. You keep it there, because there’s always that problem of when the mind finally settles down, you get excited. “Ah, it’s finally gotten quiet.” Of course, the excitement ruins the serenity. So how do you learn how to just notice, “Yep, that’s the way things are right now. Let’s see what we can do to keep them that way.” Because again, the excitement comes from papanca. “Hey, I’ve done it. Isn’t this wonderful? Maybe I can tell somebody about this. At last I’m finally getting where I want to be.” That kind of thinking pulls you away. So you want to look at this situation purely in terms of what’s happening, what’s working, what’s not working. How much pressure do you have to apply to keep the mind still? What things do you have to let go of to keep it still? So that’s the next level of skill, the next level of questioning that you have to deal with. And then when you find that you can keep the mind steady and still for a while, that’s for periods of time. While you’re sitting here, then the next question is how do you keep it still and steady while you get up, while you move around, while you find yourself surrounded by other people? And the issues that usually come when you’re surrounded by other people, how do you learn how to just let them pass? Let them pass and say, “They’re not really relevant to what I’m doing right now.” And all the worries about getting along with the other people. What will they think if I’m quiet? Fortunately, the culture in the monastery encourages quiet. We’re here to train the mind, not to just be sociable and friendly. So if you want to be quiet, people should understand. If they don’t understand, that’s their problem. Learn how to maintain your sense of inner stillness, your inner center. How do you keep that going? How do you keep that balancing act as you walk through the day? And then there’s another level of questioning. Once you’ve got this stillness of mind, what do you do with it? You try to see into what the mind is doing to fabricate suffering. What you’re doing is you’re using fabrication to deal with fabrication. It’s not the case that you use the unfabricated to get to the unfabricated, because it’s not something you can use. So you have to ask questions. What is the mind holding onto? Why is it holding onto those things? When the mind gets disturbed, what’s the cause of that disturbance? Don’t look for the outside stimulus. Look for the attitude of the mind that allows itself to be disturbed by that stimulus. After all, if there weren’t defilements in the mind, nothing outside would attract it. It’s not the case that we have this pure mind that somehow gets sullied by being in the world. Every little child that’s born has all the potentials for greed, aversion, and delusion fully stocked. It’s simply that when you’re really young, there’s a limited range of how you show that. But as your range expands, these things begin to unfold, and you say, “Wow, there’s lots of greed, aversion, and delusion in that little kid.” And all the way up through our adulthood, there’s this potential for greed, aversion, and delusion. Many times we go looking for things to be greedy about, looking for things to lust for, looking for things that we want to enjoy and indulge ourselves in, looking for things we want to get angry about. So you have to look into that. What is the part of the mind that enjoys anger? What is the part of the mind that enjoys delusion? Which of those voices in the mind, which of those committee members, really likes these things? These are useful questions to ask. And then you can ask the committee member, “Well, why do you like it?” and see what kind of answers you get. Sometimes those voices are ashamed to speak, and so we oppose them. We ask the question and nothing comes up. But if you keep probing and probing and are very firm that you’re not going to give in to these attitudes until you get a good reason, then you start hearing their reasons. You begin to realize that your defilements do have their reasons. But if you look at them carefully, listen to them carefully, you see that they really don’t make that much sense. You’ve allowed them to push you around with threats, and they’re code words. These are code words that your defilements use to wave red flags in front of your face. This is how politics works. Code words get thrown around, and people get all excited without really looking into what exactly is going on. So you’ve got to learn how to probe into the politics of your mind, that committee. That has all of its tricks. You want to learn how to see through the tricks so that you don’t get hoodwinked into falling for your defilements. So these are some of the questions you have to ask, some of the thinking you have to do, some of the fabricating you have to do, that will eventually get you beyond fabrication. As the Buddha once said, the highest form of fabricated dhamma is the Eightfold Path. He’s not saying that you use the unfabricated to get to the unfabricated. You use the unfabricated, i.e., the intentions of the mind. But you learn how to use them skillfully. Ultimately, they take you to a place where you don’t need them anymore, and then you can let them go. So, one, notice that there are these two kinds of thinking. The kind of thinking that deals in terms of the “I” or “my” identity and “my” identity within a particular world of experience. The kind of thinking that nurtures becoming. It keeps this process of becoming going. And then there’s the kind of thinking that simply looks at things in terms of stress, its cause, and what can be done to put an end to it. And in that “what can be done to put an end to it,” there are many levels of practice. How to get the mind to settle down. How to get the mind to stay settled down. How to use that settled-down mind to probe into your defilements. How to use that settled-down mind to probe into the causes of suffering. So meditation is not simply a matter of applying the technique relentlessly without thought or sensitivity. You’ve got to be very sensitive. And it’s in developing your sensitivity that true insight can grow, as you begin to hear the tones of voice in the mind that you missed before. So you can recognize which voices in the mind are in Dhamma and which ones are not, which ones are helpful and which ones are not. Ultimately, this does lead to a state where there is no thinking in the mind and the mind has no need of it. But you can’t get there simply by telling it to stop thinking or telling it to stop using words. Because that just puts it into a very dull, quiet state where there’s no understanding and there’s a lot of covering up. The purpose of the thinking is to probe and open things up. And it’s through the understanding, then, that the mind can find true peace. As I would have said, we’re purified through discernment. We’re not purified through just the power of concentration or the power of equanimity or the power of mindfulness. It’s discernment that brings us purity.

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