Useful Thinking

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When you meditate, you want to put most of your thinking aside, so you can focus on the breath. Be aware of the present moment as much as you can, but you can’t put all your thinking aside. The decision to stay with the breath, to stay in the present moment, that’s a certain type of thinking. You have to have an idea of what you’re doing, the ability to gauge the results. And when the mind wants to wander off, you have to give it some reasons for coming back, all of which involves some thinking, which means you have to have an understanding of what you’re doing. Why are you doing it? Why are we focusing on the present moment? It’s because the way we fabricate the present moment is causing suffering. We want to be able to see that clearly, to see both where the suffering or the stress is, because sometimes it’s blatant and sometimes it’s more subtle, and to see the fabrication of what we’re doing. So that’s why we’re here. As the Buddha said, there are three kinds of fabrication going on. There’s bodily fabrication, which is the breath, verbal fabrication, which is your directed thoughts, and the act of evaluation. Those are the processes that are basic to any kind of speech, both in the mind and outside. Then there’s mental fabrication, feeling and perception. It’s a good place to see all these things working together. It’s right here at the breath. The breath itself is the bodily fabrication. You think about and evaluate the breath. That’s the verbal fabrication. Certain feelings are going to arise as a result of the breath, and then those feelings are going to have an impact on how you breathe. If there’s pain in a certain body and you’re trying to hold that pain so it doesn’t spread, that’s going to affect the way you breathe and the ability of the breath energy to flow through that part of the body. Then there’s the perception that holds you at the breath, your idea of what the breath is, what sensations count as breath sensations. There’s all this fabrication going on here in the present moment. On top of that, the Buddha says that your experience of the five aggregates, your experience of form, contains an intentional element. Your experience of feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness itself has an intentional element that’s operating right here, right now. That’s what you want to see. Because you are shaping the present moment in this way, you can’t simply sit here and be totally passive. If you’re making the decision to be passive, that’s a decision with an intention to just not react. Instead of dealing with pure experience, you’re dealing with a certain type of fabricated experience, and you want to be clear about that. You want a method that highlights the fact that you are intentionally involved in the present moment. In this way, we work with the breath, experiment with the breath, to gain a sense of cause and effect. The Buddha explained his awakening as an insight into how cause and effect operate here in the present moment. So this is what we want to see. So instead of denying the intentional element, you want to bring it up to the forefront. By working with the breath, you can give rise to certain feelings, if there are pains in the different parts of the body. You want to investigate to see to what extent the way you breathe is aggravating those pains, or helping to clear them away, or at the very least to give you a sense that you can live with a pain and not have to suffer from it. The same goes with your perceptions, how you perceive the pain, say, in the body. If there’s a pain in the knee or a pain in the hip, to what extent is the pain in the knee just getting clumbed on to the hip sensations? To what extent can you separate them out and say, “Okay, this is the solidity of the hip, and that’s the pain, which is flitting around.” If you clumb them together, the pain seems steady and solid, just like, say, the bone in the hip, whereas it’s actually something very different. If you can see the distinction, that makes it easier to observe the pain. The fact that we’re doing a method here, we’re employing a method, implies that we’re making choices, so we’re going to be very clear about those choices. When the mind winds off, you remind it to come back here, because important things are happening, and it usually happens that when the mind is winding off, it’s about to make a decision about what it wants to do in the present moment, or it has already made the decision and wants to implement it and doesn’t want you to know. Or one part of the mind is doing this, and another part of the mind is being kept in the dark. So if you find yourself wandering away, you might say, “Well, this is a sign that something important is happening. Let it go back and check.” It’s like those times when they want to pass laws through the legislatures, and so they want to hide it from the people, so they create a scandal. It fills the front pages, and it’s only in the back pages that you realize that they snuck this sneaky law in on people, and nobody noticed because the scandal was everywhere. The mind does that to itself as well. It creates other issues to distract you. So you want to see that, look back in. You can’t let yourself wander off because often it’s the important things that are happening that are making you wander off to begin with. And you work with the breath because, one, it helps you understand what’s going on in the mind, but it also gives you a comfortable place to stay. You’re raising the level of the mind. The Buddha talks about concentration practice as a heightened mind. You’re giving the mind a sense of pleasure, which doesn’t have to depend on sensory objects. He calls this the pleasure of form. Or if your concentration gets really solid and very refined, you get formless pleasure as well, which lifts the level of the mind. As long as you’re feeding in sensory pleasures, the mind can’t do that. You can’t help but be worried about what the next sensory pleasure is going to be. What’s going to happen? Society seems really wacko right now. Crazy ideas are being formulated. It doesn’t sound like we’re going to have much peace. You start worrying about that. But if you can lift the mind to a higher level of pleasure, then, okay, they can’t touch this. You’re in a much safer place. The mind gets heightened, it gets placed above its concerns, rather than being below them and driven by them. This is important, too, because it allows you to drop some of the concerns that you have with things outside and actually look at how the mind, when it does get involved in those concerns, how it creates these issues, how its level drops when you let yourself be concerned by them, by giving yourself a more refined pleasure. You see the movements of the mind more clearly, and you can see it when it goes to a grosser level of pleasure, how much it’s falling, how much added stress there is, both for the sake of well-being in the present moment and for the insight it gives. You want to work with the breath, explore it. Experiment to see what kind of breathing could be helpful for what the body needs right now, what the mind needs right now. When you get a sense of ease, you can enlarge it. That’s another description that the Buddha has of the mind in concentration. He calls it maha-gatancittam, the enlarged mind or the expanded mind, filling the whole body. The mind is expansive like this. It has a greater sense of well-being and ease. Its concerns are not so narrow. When it’s expansive like this, it’s easier to stay in the present moment, because to create a thought about the past or the future, the mind has to shrink down. Your awareness has to shrink down so you can get inside that little thought balloon. As long as you stay aware of your hands, your feet, your head, every part of the body, and it all feels good, it all feels connected. If it doesn’t feel connected, ask yourself, “Where is there a sense of conflict in the breathing energy? Can you dissolve that sense of conflict so it feels like all the breath channels are connected?” And the breathing process gets more and more refined. So you’re basically heightening the mind and expanding it. It has a greater sense of well-being in the present moment, and it’s in a better position to see things clearly, in particular, to see how it is involved in shaping its own experience. Here, you can shape the mind so that it’s expanded. You can shape it so that it’s heightened. This is something you can do. What else are you doing? Here’s something you’re doing. You’re trying to do it skillfully. How do you sense when it’s going well? How do you sense when it’s going not? What’s the difference between when it’s going well and when it’s not going well? You’re developing a sense of judgment, which the Buddha encourages greatly. It’s amazing that one of the big ironies of Buddhism coming to the West is that we’re taught not to be judgmental, which is true. But people make it sound like you’re not supposed to use your powers of judgment at all, which is not true. The Buddha has you be judicious to develop your discernment of what you’re going to do, what you’re not going to do, when you’re doing it well, when you’re not doing it well, because you’re doing, doing, doing all the time. Even when you’re sitting here and thinking you’re not doing anything at all, you’re doing that not-doing-anything-at-all role. You want to see when it’s appropriate and when it’s not, when it’s helpful and when it’s not. So when you find yourself wondering what you’re doing here, just looking at your breath, remind yourself that everything important in life is happening right here. The extent to which you’re shaping ease or suffering is happening right here. And this doesn’t involve just you. Your own sense of happiness, your own ability to rely on yourself, the less of a burden you’re placing on others. So all the important things are happening right here. It’s simply a matter of developing your sensitivity to what’s happening. And the best way to do that is to develop skill in what you’re doing right now. Because as long as you’re shaping your experience willy-nilly anyhow, you’re going to might as well shape it well. It’s in the development of skill that you understand things. It’s like learning to be a pianist. As you work on the scales, you begin to understand your hand a lot better. You develop your ear, you develop your coordination, you develop all kinds of skills, and you develop a lot of understanding in the process of doing that. So as long as you’re fabricating your experience right now, that’s that total. Out of nothing, you’ve got the raw materials that are presented by your past karma. But as long as you’re doing it, you might as well do it well, because you can’t learn how to do it well. Then it goes beyond that. In doing it well, you learn other things as well. It goes deeper and deeper into the mind, these deeper layers of fabrication, these deeper layers that the mind keeps making. Then as your skill develops and your sensitivity gets more refined, you see more. You can strip away a lot of these layers until you find something that’s totally unfabricated. And you know it because you’ve been dealing with some very subtle fabrications up to that point. So you don’t have to keep all of this in mind as you’re fabricating. It’s good to have it there in the background to pull out when you need it, to keep yourself on course. After all, the Buddha put right view at the beginning of the path. Notice it’s not right knowledge. There’s a lot you don’t know yet as you get started. For the Buddha, it was right knowledge. For us, we’re taking this knowledge and we’re adopting it as a view to use. It’s our basic set of working assumptions, and you want them there so that they can actually help you as part of the path. So it’s the kind of thinking that really fosters concentration, fosters insight. So not all thinking is bad. Part of the skill of the path is learning when you want to think, what to think about, and what not to think about. You want to have a sense of time and place. And when you develop that skill, your powers of thought become an aid to release.

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