Don’t Think You’re the Thinker

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You’ve probably seen the meditation bumper sticker, the one that says, “Don’t believe everything you think.” That’s good advice, but you can take it further. Don’t believe that you’re thinking it. As soon as you have the idea that a thought coming into your head is your thought, that you’re thinking it, you’re taking it further. You’re taking on that identity, and it’s hard to drop it. This is especially important when the thoughts are coming thick and fast and they’re all unskillful. You need a way to observe them simply as something is happening, but they’re not your thoughts and they’re not the thoughts you agree with. They may be seeming to come from a very deep part in your body, but then again, it’s your body yourself. All these chemical reactions are going on in the body, and especially if there’s a chemical imbalance, there’s going to be an imbalance in your thoughts. And you want to remember, you don’t have to identify with yourself as the thinker. The Buddha says that that idea that “I am the thinker” is a perception. It’s a perception that starts you off on the path to conflict. You end up having conflict with people outside, but more importantly, with yourself. You hear battling. You want to sit and meditate, and all the things are going on. And if you could see it simply as other things going on, like the crickets in the background, or that faint sound of helicopters off there, you can ignore it. You’re not singing with the crickets. You’re not flying the helicopter. It’s something that’s in the background. So when the thoughts are insistent like this, try to think of them as in the background. Try to focus on their passing away. We’ve talked in the past about dealing with pain in this way, learning to see things as coming in moments. And each moment is passing away, passing away. It’s not coming at you, it’s going away from you. But we’re so good at knitting thoughts together that we forget that there’s a large part of the thought that’s just passing away, passing away. And we have to revive it, moment by moment by moment, in order to keep it going. And our usual habit is to keep it going. Our usual habit is to look for the thoughts as they’re coming, so you can stitch them into the fabric. But see if you can learn how to see the thoughts as discrete moments. And it makes sense only if you stitch them together. I used to play a game when I was at Vana Sukhara. I had to sit through some pretty bad Dhamma talks during the group meditation sessions. And after years of trying to learn how to understand Thay, I thought it would be useful to not understand. The same as when I was getting cursed by somebody in Thay, I asked myself, “Well, who went to all the trouble to learn how to understand Thay cursing?” I put a different cast on things. For the Dhamma talks, I would try to just focus on each word one at a time, without thinking about how it related to the words around it. Just be there with the sound, the sound, the sound. And the mind is quick. You can really be with the sound, and it doesn’t make any sense at all. And you can do the same with your thoughts. If your energy level is up—and this is important because a lot of these instructions work best when the mind feels strong. And, of course, the mind is most beset by these kinds of thoughts when it’s feeling weak, when you’re tired. This is why it’s so important to work with the breath and to keep working with the breath all the time. Always be in touch with how the breath energy is going inside the body. Try to notice where your main trigger points are. How much tension do you hold in your wrists, in your elbows, in your knees, in your ankles? Try consciously releasing that tension and see what that does to the energy flow in the rest of the body. And if you find a spot that really is your trigger point and can keep it relaxed, there’s a strong sense of refreshment that comes from that. You’re using up less energy, and that gives you more energy to devote to other things. So if the body’s all tense, try to notice when you tense things up, where does it first come, and from where does it spread to other things? Can you go back and release that first spot? And then notice the chain reaction as the remaining strands of tension. Who’s their original spot to hold on to? As you go through the day more fluidly like this, you find that you do have more strength, at the very least, when you can recognize that the mind is getting out of control and you don’t identify with it. You can hold that perception in mind. It’s there, and it’s going to be all around you. It’s not like you’re in one side of the head and the thoughts are on the other side. They seem to permeate everything. So think of them as the radio waves going through this room. There are radio waves from different radio stations in San Diego, Los Angeles, Tijuana, who knows? But you can focus in on one signal. And even though the other waves are all around you, you don’t have to pick them up. So when these thoughts are coming up, just allow them to disperse. You’re right here. They may be right here, too, but you’re right here is defined by the fact that you’re not going to be getting involved. You’re just going to be aware, aware, aware. That’s your intention at the moment. Learn how to maintain an intention that’s going to help you. Make an intention that doesn’t require a lot of fancy thinking. So when things are going well in the mind, learn how to maintain the intention to stay with the breath. Get practice in keeping this intention in mind, because you find that it will strengthen you in periods when everything else gets weak. So these storms of thoughts can come through the mind and then just go blowing wherever they are. And you don’t have to get blown around by them. Or like the wind going through a screen. The screen is there. It doesn’t have to move with the wind. The wind goes right through. And the screen isn’t thinking, “Are these gusts of wind coming through? Are they gusts that I’m causing or that I’m responsible for?” You might say, “Well, in your mind, who’s responsible for them?” And you don’t have to assign responsibility. They’re just there. You’re not denying the fact. You’re just not identifying with the processes. Because you’ve probably seen how many thoughts the mind picks up simply through the rhythm of doing something. When you’re walking, you discover that you’re developing a certain rhythm, and all of a sudden that rhythm goes along with a song that you remember from who knows when. And it wasn’t like you consciously decided you wanted to remember the song. It just kind of came in. Well, there are a lot of thoughts like that. Especially when your bodily chemistry is out of whack. All kinds of things are going to come bubbling up. This is when it’s good to think of that concept of fermentation. They just bubble up and then you let them go bubbling through and that’s it. You don’t have to be responsible for the fermentation process. You’ve got your perception and you’ve got the breath energies that you can hold onto. Try to keep those as smoothed out as possible and as continuous as possible. That gives you the strength to keep these points of discernment in mind. You don’t have to fall back into your old habits of identifying with something or trying to push it away. Just let it go through, let it disperse. Just try to keep your foundation here as continuous as you can. And that helps strengthen the discernment. That’s your raft at the moment, the raft you hold onto. We all want to get to the point where we’re crossed over the river and we don’t need the raft anymore. But when you’re going across the river, you’ve got to hold on tight. And you really appreciate having that place to hold on tight to, when you see how many storms and waves and other things that can protect you from.

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