To Master the Ways of Thought

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One of the benefits of the practice, the Buddha says, is that you become a master of the ways of thought. You can think any thought you want to, and not think any thought you don’t want to. Imagine what that would be like. Destructive thoughts can come. Come into the mind and just let them go. They don’t have any pull over you, any power over you. Good thoughts come into the mind and you can think them through. And you recognize which is which. But notice that it’s master of the ways of thought. You understand the processes that give rise to a thought. So you can turn thoughts on and off. You turn off every thought. Decide that you’re going to stay with the breath. You’re going to think about the breath, evaluate the breath. But every other thought that’s not related to that, you’re going to let go, regardless of whether they’re true or false, good or bad, interesting or uninteresting, whatever. Because you want to understand the ways of thought. And you’re not going to understand them until you try to put a stop to them. So even though you’re not totally turning off every thought, you are thinking about the breath, you’re evaluating it. Does it feel good? Does it not feel good? If it’s not feeling good, what can you do to make it feel better? Those are good things to think about. And at what point have you adjusted the breath enough so you can just settle right down and let go of that level of thinking and just be left with a perception? Breath, breath, breath. Those are things you can work with. Those are things you can think about right now. As for whatever else comes up, it’s going to be a hindrance in getting to see what the breath is doing, or how you can improve it, or how you can stay with it. So you want to let it go. Part of you wants to let it go. Another part of you would like to probably think about it. That’s what you’ve got to look into. The texts give all kinds of methods for dealing with sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and anxiety, uncertainty. But for the methods to work, you have to really want to make them work. And that’s where the mind gets split. Part of the mind would like to take the opportunity we have right here, a whole hour, nothing else to do, nothing else to think about. How about thinking about sensual pleasures? Or even without consciously thinking about it, you suddenly find yourself working over some old injustices and developing a strong sense of ill will for somebody. Or simply anger. Not necessarily ill will, but you find yourself really irritated. And you’ve got to keep thinking about it over and over and over again. So you have to look into it. Why do you want to think about that? This is an important part of the right effort. It’s learning how to, as the Buddha says, generate desire to do the right thing. How are you going to motivate yourself? You can learn to recognize that even though some of the things, the sensual pleasures, you want to think about really are enjoyable, really are pleasant, and you enjoy thinking about them. But you have to remind yourself, not now. This is the principle the Buddha has. Something may be true, but it’s not necessarily beneficial, and this may not be the right time. Especially when you’re trying to understand the ways of thought. They’re like the currents of a river. If you really want to understand the river’s current, try building a dam across it. You’ll learn a lot about it that you wouldn’t learn otherwise. And you certainly don’t learn a lot about the river’s currents floating down the river. You learn about one or two currents, but some of the deeper ones you don’t know anything about. They can surprise you. So you want to take a stance. You’re not going to think anything that’s not related to the breath. This means that you’re actually performing two duties. It’s described in the instructions on how to establish mindfulness. On the one hand, you want to be focused on keeping track of the body in and of itself. And on the other hand, you want to be putting aside any greed or distress with reference to the world. Greed is just the desire to think about the world. Distress is when you get upset about things going on in the world. And the greed may be for things that really are nice. The distress may be over things that really are horrible. An important part of learning about the processes of thought is realizing that regardless of whether something is true or false, it’s irrelevant right now. You’re trying to step out of the truths and falsenesses of your thoughts. The good or bad, the right or wrong, you want to step back. Just learn to look at the processes, because sometimes some very good and right thoughts can make you miserable to no purpose. So you want to learn how to step back even from the good ones, the right ones. That’s just a thought process. And as you learn how to step back from the thoughts and get really determined that as soon as you realize you’ve slipped off the breath, you’re going to drop the thought and come right back, the more quickly you can do that, the more you understand the stages of how a thought forms and how the mind starts to ride with it. What is the sound of two hands clapping there as the thought arises? What would be the sound of one hand clapping? In other words, something comes up and you don’t respond to it. And it just dies away. An important step in that is looking at what is the part of the mind that wants to make something out of that little thought. Because the beginning of thought is just a little stirring of energy. It’s not yet committed to being anything, either physical or mental. And as the mind steps in and places its perception on it, this is a thought, and it’s a little thought. It’s about x. It can be about the past, about the future, whatever. As soon as you’ve decided that it’s a thought, it becomes grounds for a thought. And the thought starts going out in certain directions. Sometimes you can control the directions it goes, and many times you find that it suddenly takes a sharp left or a sharp right turn that you didn’t expect. That’s why even the thoughts that look good and true can be dangerous. So you want to look at the processes as like opening up a machine and seeing the gears, or going backstage when a play is being put on, instead of sitting out in the audience and letting yourself simply be entertained by the play. You want to see what the actors are doing when they’re not on stage. What is the stage crew doing behind the scenery? That helps to dispel a thought. You realize that even though characters are depicted as falling in love and dying or whatever, they’re not really in love and they’re not really dying. And you’re not taken in by the illusion. You see the processes. You see the steps. So it’s important you learn how to step back. Step back from everything—good, bad, right, wrong—and take your stance here with the breath in and of itself. Just the feeling of the breathing, the flow of energy in the body. Where do you feel that? Immerse yourself in it. Dip down into it. It’s like getting into a bath. You just dip down into the bath and then you stay there. The breath energy is flowing in the body. The breath energy is flowing around the body. That becomes your standpoint outside of the world of your head, outside the world of your thoughts. It’s when you have this foundation, a physical foundation, that you have a standpoint where you can step back from your thoughts no matter how good they are, no matter how interesting, no matter how creative. You don’t really have control over the processes until you can step back and turn the process off and on whenever you want. Then you’re not going to be able to do that until you learn how to turn off the process even when you want to keep it going, when you don’t want to turn it off. Because you’re learning an awful lot about your wants right there. So we’re in training right now. We read a lot about how the awakened person is carefree wherever he or she goes. But to get to that point of being carefree, you have to be very careful about what you’re doing as you practice. We’re still on the raft crossing the river. We haven’t gotten to the other side yet. So be very careful around your thoughts, this step of putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. It’s mentioned again and again in the Satipaṭṭhāna sutta, but it’s part of the formula that’s never explained in that sutta. It’s explained elsewhere in the Canon about how you learn how to put aside your greed, put aside your aversion, put aside your delusion. Sometimes you want to just see things coming and going, and other times you want to put a stop to them. Otherwise, they’re like water. They keep wearing and wearing away. They keep dropping, dropping, dropping, and they can wear away even rock. So don’t underestimate their power. Learn how to get outside them and above them in every possible way, in every possible thought that might come up. And that’s when you’re really a master of the ways of thought.

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