Thoughts to Control Your Thoughts

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We can often suffer in life from the fact that our thoughts pull us in many different directions, some of which we like and some of which we don’t like. Or some that we like and we know they’re going to lead us to some suffering down the line, and others we don’t like but expect will lead to some happiness. So there’s a war right there. Our likes and our expectations. We’d like to have pleasure right now and to avoid pain right now, but some of the things we do to get that pleasure right now lead to pain down the line. That’s not the fact that you have one desire in mind at a time. Sometimes you have many desires and they pull in different directions. Think of one of the six animals. You’ve got a crocodile, a bird, a snake, a dog, a monkey, and a hyena. You put leashes on them and you’re in the middle with the leashes pulling you in different directions. And if you’re not really firm, they can drag you down. A crocodile will probably drag you down into the water and then eat you up. What you need is a firm post. You can tie the leashes to the firm post and then the animals don’t pull you around. Eventually they’ll have to settle down. And the breath here is our firm post. You give yourself one thing to think about and for the time being you tell yourself nothing else. And it’s not just thinking. You’re also aware of the breath. You’re alert to what it’s doing. When it comes in, you know it’s coming in. When it goes out, you know it’s going out. And you can ask yourself some questions about this. A technical term for this is evaluation. Is the breath comfortable? If not, what can you do to make it more comfortable? Because if you’re going to stay with it, you want it to be something you like. So take some good long, deep in-and-out breaths in a way that feels refreshing. And if long breathing feels good, keep it up. And you can change. You can also remind yourself that the breath isn’t just a matter of the nose and the windpipe and the lungs. Your whole torso gets involved. So keep your whole torso relaxed. Think about that sense of relaxation then spreading out throughout the whole body. So it’s a good place to stay. And if you have trouble settling down, you can ask yourself why. There might be something in the breath, there might be something in the mind. This is another function of evaluation. Are you holding on to some thoughts that are keeping you from meditating? Well, just put them aside if you can. Just stay right here. You’ve got to keep watch over what you’re doing so that you can get the most benefit out of it. Because you’re trying to develop a good, solid place right here where you can go. Even when you’re not meditating, when thoughts are pulling you around, you can go to a solid place with the breath and say, “I’m just going to stay right here for the time being.” And the thoughts may pull, but you’re not going to let them drag you around. And after a while, they’ll calm down. You have to be patient. This takes time. Because we’ve been thinking since we first learned language. And the mind just keeps churning up more and more thoughts all the time. When distractions come in, don’t get upset, don’t get discouraged. Just let them go. You don’t have to follow them. Think of your mind as like a committee. Lots of members of the committee have lots of different ideas, and they’ll propose them. They may be quiet for the time being as you start meditating, but after a while they get impatient and they have their ideas about what they think you should be thinking. But think of them just as that, committee members. The thought comes in. You don’t have to say, “This is my thought,” or “This forces me to think in a certain way or do something.” It’s just an idea that somebody in the committee came up with. You can let it go and say, “Now is not the time to make a decision. The only decision you want to make is that. This is not the time.” If you have some really important things to think about in the course of your life, you can put them at the end of the meditation when the mind has been rested and it’s clearer, more stable. In other words, meditation is a matter of learning how to manage your mind, knowing what things are worth thinking about, what things are worth putting aside, what things need to be done right now, what things can be put off into the future, and what things don’t need to be done at all. There’s a certain amount of thinking that goes into meditation. It’s not that we’re sitting here blank. We’re not thinking at all. It’s simply a matter of learning how to use our thinking in a way that brings the mind to stillness, brings it into a sense of unity inside. So you’re thinking about one thing, and that’s enough. That suffices. If there are any pains in the body, just let them go. If there are any pains in the knees, say, “Well, the pain’s going to have the knees. I’m going to be here with the breath.” Try to sit in a way that your posture doesn’t cause problems. But if you’re not used to sitting still, you can stay with one posture for a while. Then if the pain gets really distracting, you can sit with it for a few more minutes and then change position. Don’t change position right away, because otherwise you’ll be changing all the time. You want to notice what the mind is actually doing. This is how you get some control over it. We need to learn how to observe the mind. See when an intention comes in, how does it insinuate its way into your decision-making process so that you assume that it’s your intention or your desire, when it’s simply one of those committee members. You can see through it. In other words, you don’t have to be influenced by it. So just think about the breath and learn how to ask the right questions. The right questions are, “Where is there stress here? What can I do to alleviate it?” Well, to alleviate it, you have to look for the cause and then let go of the cause. In particular, we’re looking at stress in the mind. What is the mind doing to cause itself unnecessary stress? It’s thinking about lots of things all at once. Try to think about one thing. And then as you’re thinking about one thing, you try to pare that down. The more you stay with the breath, the more you have a sense that your awareness and the breath are one. You don’t have to think about it so much anymore. It’s just enough to keep you there. This is another technical term, appropriate attention. You pay attention, ask the right questions about what you’re doing here. This is a principle that goes all the way through the Buddhist teachings, from simple things like what kind of breathing is comfortable unto, what is the mind doing, what is it holding onto that makes it suffer, or when you’re in a state of concentration, it’s not really suffering, but there’s still sometimes a little disturbance in there. But what is the mind still holding onto that allows these disturbances to stay? Is it something in the concentration itself, or is it something from another committee member? When you ask these questions, you find that the state of your mind gets more refined, and you begin to see that what you’re doing is really not all that necessary. It’s like a child learning how to walk. Have you ever noticed a baby child walking? It’s using a lot of muscles in its body in kind of a jerky way because it isn’t really sure yet which muscles are necessary and which ones are not. So it has to give all of its attention to the walking. If it doesn’t use the right muscles, it falls down. So the tendency is to use too many. But as it gets a better and better sense of which muscles are necessary and which ones are not, it can walk with more grace and put less thought into it, less energy into it. It’s the same with meditation. When you try to get the mind to settle down in the very beginning, there’s a lot of struggle. Sometimes you do it with too heavy a hand. But as you work with it, you begin to realize, “Okay, I don’t need to have quite that amount of heaviness on it.” There are times, of course, when you really will. When a really strong desire comes up, it pulls you away from the concentration. You have to fight it off. You can’t give into it. That requires some extra strength and some extra persistence. There are other times, though, when things clear up, and it’s simply a matter of maintaining what you’ve got. And riding with it. It’s like gaining a sense of balance on your bicycle. When you first get on the bike, it’s hard to maintain your balance. The bike is just standing there. But as the bike begins to move, you realize that the movement of the bike makes the balance easier. The momentum builds up, and balancing is less of a problem. It’s the same with meditation. To get started sometimes requires a lot of effort to get into balance, and it’s easy to fall off. But then you’ve just got to get back on again. And as you ride with the breath, then the momentum builds up. So take note of that fact. That’s something to remember. So it’s not that we’re not thinking here. It’s just that we’re learning how to think in a way that’s useful to get some control over the mind, and get some respite from all of its many different thoughts and many different desires. Because when you have lots of different desires, it’s like you’re living in many different worlds, and they’re all pulling at you, and you have different senses of who you are. There’s the you that wants some rest. There’s the you that wants to meditate. There are lots of yous in there. And if they’re pulling in different directions, you are the one that feels pulled. That can get you really frustrated, but if you learn how to pare these things down. So for the time being, it’s just the you meditating here. Then things can settle down inside, and there can be a sense of respite, a sense of relief. A lot of the burdens you’ve been carrying around, you can put down, at least for the time being. And you put them down with awareness, so you know how to do it. This is different from just falling asleep. You fall asleep and you let things go. But you don’t develop any good, strong qualities in the mind to withstand things for when you’re awake. It’s just a moment of respite, and then you’re back to where you were before. But in this way, you’ve been developing some skills. Mindfulness, the ability to keep something in mind. Alertness, the ability to know what you’re doing and the results of what you’re doing. A sense of ardency, you try to do it well. Evaluation, you learn how to evaluate what the mind is doing, what’s good and what’s not, and let go of what’s not. Appropriate attention, learning how to ask the right questions. What’s going on in the mind? And then these skills can help you no matter where you are, no matter what you’re doing. You’re learning how to step back above your thoughts so they don’t pull you around. You’re on top of that post. And as long as the post is firm, you’re safe. Try to keep this connection with the breath as constant as you can, because that’s what keeps you from getting pulled around.

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