The Buddha on How to Think

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As a passage for the Buddha, he teaches different ways of dealing with distracting thoughts. The very simple one is, if you suddenly find yourself away from the topic of your meditation, just note the fact that this is not what you’re here for, and you go back. And you make a few adjustments in the topic of your meditation. Make sure you don’t wander off again. Second one is to think about the drawbacks of that kind of thinking, that distractive thinking. You’ve thought it for a while. Where would it lead you to do? Where would it take you? When you see that it would take you to a place that’s not all that good, you come back. The third one is simply to ignore it. It can have that little corner of the mind that you’re going to stay in. There’s no reason to get involved with it. And John Lee has a nice image for this. He says it’s like trying to chase your shadow. The more you run after your shadow, the more it runs away from you, and it’s pulled you away from where you were. So just accept the fact that there’s a shadow, but you don’t have to pay it any attention. The fourth technique is to remind yourself that that kind of thinking certainly involves a certain amount of fabrication, a certain amount of effort. If you can see where in the body there’s a corresponding pattern of tension that goes with that thinking, you breathe right through it, relax it. The fifth method is to grit your teeth, press your tongue against the palate, and crush your mind, as the Buddha said. You will not think that thought. This is where a meditation word is useful. You have the word so you can repeat it rapid-fire in your mind, so there are no gaps for your mind to slip out. Usually one of those techniques will take care of just about anything that’s going to come up. But at the end of this passage, where the Buddha talks about these ways of stopping yourself from thinking, he doesn’t say that the purpose is to not think at all. It’s more to get some control over your thoughts so that you can think the thoughts you want to think and not think the thoughts you don’t want to think. For the most part, our minds are like a car that we just leave running. You park it in the garage and you leave the engine on, just in case you might have to use it. Of course, it’s going to use up power, it’s going to use up energy, it’s going to pollute the air, but it just keeps running, running, running. And that’s not good for the car. The same with the mind. We just keep churning out stuff. Sometimes you really have to think about something, so you settle down and think about it. And then when you’re done with that issue, the mind doesn’t stop. It just keeps churning out thoughts about this, that, the other thing. And it gets so that when it’s worn down like this, you can’t really trust it to think through the things you really do need to think through. So the Buddha gives instructions on how to stop thinking, how to turn it off, basically, when you don’t need it. But he also gives instructions on how to think when you’ve got it turned on. The first instructions have to do with right view. But even before the Buddha gets to right view, he talks about how you develop discernment, and it comes from a question. This question should always be at the back of your mind whenever you’re trying to make a decision. What will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What’s blameworthy? What’s blameless? What’s skillful? What’s unskillful? Make those thoughts the framework for your thinking. And the Buddha’s answer to those questions would be generosity, virtue, meditation, or skillful. They lead to your long-term welfare and happiness. And it’s a happiness that’s blameless. Getting the mind into concentration is getting it into a happiness that is blameless. And beyond that, you use the concentration to get the mind to settle down, to get it refreshed. As he said, if you’re thinking all the time, where’s the mind at? Even if you’re thinking skillful thoughts all the time, you get the mind to stop and settle down and be still. When you have to come out and think about something, it’s like a knife that’s been sharpened. You see the issue a lot more clearly and you can cut right through it. Then in right view, the Buddha talks about the various assumptions you should make as you’re trying to decide how long-term is long-term and what is welfare and happiness. Long-term for him means going on through many lifetimes. That’s a perspective that a lot of us in the West don’t take seriously. Some people say, “Well, the Buddha was simply a child of his times, and this is a relic or an artifact of Indian culture that somehow got into the Dhamma.” But the Buddha was not the sort of person that would put something in simply because other people in India believed it. Think about all those other issues that were the hot issues of the time. There’s the numerous eternal, non-eternal, finite, infinite. Is the soul the same thing as the body? Is it something else? What about the status of an enlightened being after death? Does this person exist, not exist, both, neither? Those were the big issues. And if the Buddha had wanted to include some artifacts of Indian culture in his teachings, he would have taken a stance on those. But he saw that they were totally useless with regard to the issue of suffering. So he dropped them entirely. The fact that he left rebirth in right view shows that he was serious. This is really an important thing to take into consideration. Because when we’re thinking about courses of action we’re going to follow, the question always is, “Will the results of this action be worth the effort?” And then you calculate, depending on how long you think you’re going to be around, how long it’s going to take to reap the results of those actions, and you look at other people. What kind of actions have they engaged in that lead to happiness? How long does that happiness last? And if your frame of reference is simply one lifetime, it’s going to influence your decisions in a lot of areas of life. You’ll think to yourself, “Well, this is my one chance to get x. It’s not worth it.” Sensual pleasures are a big issue right here. You’re a human being. You tell yourself, “Human beings enjoy these pleasures. If I don’t enjoy these pleasures, I’m not having a full human life.” But if you look at it in terms of rebirth, you’re going to realize that these are the kinds of pleasures you’ve been going after for who knows how long. You’ve had them all. As the Buddha said, you see someone who’s wealthy, endowed with all the possible pleasures you can imagine, and you have to remind yourself that you’ve been there too. This is why he says, even when he gives what’s called the graduated discourse, he talks about the rewards of generosity and virtue in heaven. And then he talks about the drawbacks, even the degradation of sensuality. Even heavenly sensual pleasures don’t last. When you get used to them, you get spoiled. When you fall, you fall hard. When you take this perspective and you take it seriously, sensual pleasures begin to seem a lot less important. It’s the same with wealth, status, trying to accomplish something in the world. You begin to realize that all these things come and then they go. And the question is, what are you left with? Because you keep on going. You’re left with your karma. You’re left with a state of mind. You’re left with habits. So the question is, what kind of actions will lead to good habits in this perspective? Of course, the best habits of the Buddha said are the ones that get you out. This is why we develop mindfulness, concentration, and discernment to an even higher degree. But it’s all within that perspective. So ask yourself, how seriously do you take the Buddha here? He was serious. He didn’t talk about rebirth just for the fun of it. He said this is an important thing to take into consideration. Dig down into the layers of conversation in your mind and see how far down it goes. I know in my own case it took a while for things to go deeper and deeper and deeper. And the more seriously I take it, the gladder I am. But it’s up to each of us to decide how seriously we’re going to take the Buddha when he makes us one of the cornerstones of right view. Because after all, he’s there even in the Four Noble Truths. He’s going to put an end not only to the suffering of aging, illness, and death, but also the suffering of birth. If birth were not an issue, if it were something that’s already behind us and that’s the last time we have to deal with that, he wouldn’t have listed it. When they describe the states of mind or the realizations that come with awakening, almost always the first is, “That’s the last birth,” or “This is the last body.” So it’s an important issue. It’s not one that we can just say, “Well, we don’t like that in the West. It’s not congruent with our beliefs. It doesn’t seem relevant to our lives. Our lives are engaged in other things.” Well, we may be engaged in other things, but we’ve got the big issues that the Buddha addressed directly. We’re aging, illness, and death, and then birth, and then more aging, more illness, more death. And those issues are always relevant. And it’s his teachings that are congruent with the reality of those things. So we don’t let our preconceived notions get in the way. Try to take on the Buddhist perspective of things. So when the mind is rested and wants to look into an issue, it also has some guidance into how to think about things in a way that does lead to long-term welfare and happiness.

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