

The Thinking Cure

September 18, 2006

The Buddha once said that he got started on the right path of practice when he learned to observe his thinking, noticing which kinds of thoughts were skillful, which kinds were unskillful. In other words which kinds of thinking lead to harm, which kinds of thinking didn't lead to harm. Notice that: He didn't say he got on the path when he learned to stop thinking. He got on the path when he learned to observe his thinking and to see it as part of a causal process. This is important, because a lot of meditation has to do with thinking. There's a popular misconception that meditation means not thinking at all. But if you look at all the descriptions of the noble eightfold path, you see that they all start with right view. Then they continue with right resolve. In other words they start with thinking: learning how to think in the right way.

This is why we have Dhamma talks. If thinking weren't involved in the practice, if your views weren't important in the practice, Dhamma talks wouldn't serve any function. You'd have to teach by example by not saying anything at all. But meditation doesn't work that way. You have to learn how to think in the right way as you come to meditation. This is a thinking cure.

In psychotherapy they have talking cures. And they note how amazing it is: Sometimes simply talking over a neurosis—getting it out in the open, learning to be very clear about the presuppositions behind it—can disband it. It loses its power. In a similar vein, meditation is learning how to watch our thoughts, to be very clear about how the mind thinks. Learn how to bring up its assumptions—the unexpressed assumptions or the ones just barely expressed—so that you can see them in the light of day. Then you can see what kinds of thinking you really *do* believe in, what kinds of thinking you don't. Often you'll find that things that have been having the most power over the mind are the ones that, if you really look at them, don't really make any sense at all.

So it's important as you meditate that you have a sense of the role and power of thinking in the meditation. For example, as we're doing breath meditation, try to get the mind to settle down with the breath, get concentrated on the breath. As the Buddha said, every state of concentration depends on a perception, a mental label you create, a little message you can carry from one moment to the next, one that you can remember, that you can be mindful of. Here that message is: "breath."

So what is your concept of the breath? How do you relate to it? We talk about forcing the breath, but the breath isn't the sort of thing you can force. You can force the blood to different parts of your body, and that's often what we do when we think we're moving the breath around in the body. We're simply changing the way the blood circulates. We can get ourselves into some pretty strange physical states this way, and they can have an effect on the mind because you're forcing the blood too much. In other words, you're playing around with what the texts call the liquid element, or the liquid property, and you've missed the breath entirely.

But this is the way we often relate to our body. An emotion comes up and a lot

of the physical side of the emotion has to do with the fact that our blood circulation has changed. When we were little children, before we learned any language, we ran up against pain, and one of the ways we dealt with it was try to force it away. We actually used a change in the blood circulation to try to force the pain away. That became our instinctive way of relating to the body: to force the blood to circulate in a different way. This is why so much of the imagery of psychotherapy is from hydraulic mechanics. Emotions get pushed underground and then they force their way here, force their way there, the same way that liquids under pressure get forced around and break the pipes.

But as a meditator you've got to realize there are other ways of relating to the energy in the body. In fact, the only way you can really get in touch with the breath is to reconceive the whole way you relate to the body. The best way to deal with the breath is simply to think: allow. Think of the breath going down the back. You don't push it down the back. You allow it to go. When you think of the breath going to the different parts of the body, don't try to push it. You allow it. If you push it, you're pushing the blood. You're pushing the liquids in the body. What you can do is just think: open up, open up. Keep your wrists relaxed, keep your ankles relaxed. All your joints: Keep them relaxed. Think of opening up the passages by which the breath can flow. You can't *make* the breath flow. It's something it's going to do on its own once you've opened the channels.

So you maintain the thought of just "breath." You might want to picture the body and, say, think of breath going down the back, out the legs, down the shoulders, out the arms, spreading out in all directions. You can keep that picture, that perception in mind, but try not to force anything in the body. As soon as you start forcing things, it gets difficult.

This is part of the thinking cure: getting a new conception of the breath and learning to hold on to that conception. And you need a new conception of yourself as well, of what you can do. Often this is a huge part of the meditation. I remember looking through collections of Dhamma talks from the forest ajaans, and this applies to all of them: So much of their talks is spent not in explaining things, but in encouraging. Reminding people that this is something you can do. You can relate to the body in a different way from the way you've been doing it. You can relate to the mind in a different way.

As the Buddha once said, if it weren't possible for people to change their ways from unskillful to skillful, he wouldn't have taught the practice of developing skill. It wouldn't have served any purpose. But it is possible. When you've been doing something unskillful, you can change. You realize that there is another way of doing things and that you're capable of doing it.

This requires a certain amount of imagination. That's the beginning of any change in your behavior: allowing yourself to imagine that you can change the way you behave. This is another part of the thinking cure.

This applies to all aspects of the practice. You start with generosity. When you make up your mind to give a gift, you're imagining yourself as someone with something to spare. Up to that point, you may have been thinking that you're hungry and lacking, and all you could think about was gaining, gaining, gaining, getting, getting, getting. But when you allow yourself to think that you have more than enough, you can give. And you begin to realize that this has very little to do with how much you may have materially. Poor people can often be more

generous than rich people because they have a different idea of “enough.” When you make this simple change in your thinking, you put yourself in a new place: a place with more dignity, a place of more inner worth.

The gift of forgiveness is the same sort of thing. Someone else has harmed you. If all you can think about is how much you’re a victim, you make yourself a smaller person. But if you think of yourself as large-hearted enough to forgive, you suddenly become a larger person. That gives the mind more space to move around.

And so on down the line. You learn that you can observe the precepts. You learn that you can meditate, simply by changing the way you think about yourself and your capabilities.

So remember that this is a thinking cure. There do come parts of the practice where you learn not to think, but you have your reasons for not thinking. You’re doing it with specific aims in mind, so be clear about your aims and where your aims come from. What are the values that lie behind them? What’s your understanding of suffering and the end of suffering that lies behind how you do things? Make sure to straighten out your thoughts. Once you straighten out your thoughts, realizing how suffering comes about and how you can put an end to it, you’ve got everything you need to put an end to it. It’s simply a matter of allowing yourself to think in those ways.

Notice that the emphasis is on allowing. You don’t have to force yourself. You allow something better than what has been happening to happen.

Ajaan Fuang once said that if we could force our way into nirvana, everybody would have arrived there a long time ago. But it’s not something you can do by force. You ultimately get there only through discernment. And discernment starts with learning how to think in the right way. It doesn’t cost anything, doesn’t require a lot of energy: just allowing yourself to think in skillful ways. That can turn you around right there, and head you in the right direction. So before you stop thinking, learn how to think in ways that are really helpful, allow yourself to think in ways that are really helpful, and it will make all the difference in your practice.