

Thoughts, Wanted and Unwanted

January 4, 2014

One of the goals of meditation is learning how to gain some control over your thoughts, so that you think the thoughts you want to think and don't think the thoughts you don't want to think.

There are several strategies that we employ. Focusing on the breath is one of them. This gives you something to fall back on. Whenever you find yourself engaged in thinking that's destructive or upsetting, you know you have something else to think about. So think about your breath for a while, and watch it. As you breathe in and out, notice where you feel it. Notice whether it feels good. This gives you plenty to think about. There's the rhythm of the breath that you can evaluate: You can make it longer or shorter, in long, out short, in short, out long. You can make it heavier, lighter, faster, slower, deeper, more shallow, and you can evaluate what feels good for the body right now.

You can also think about other aspects of the breath energy in the body. When you breathe in and out, there's not just the air coming in and out of the lungs. There's also a flow of energy through your nerves, a flow of energy through your blood vessels. As you get more sensitive to the breath, you begin to notice these things. In the beginning, if you don't immediately sense this level of breath, just tell yourself, "It's possible." As you breathe in, there's healthy breath energy going down your arms, down your torso, down your legs, through your head, in your hands, in your feet. Be open to that possibility. And think of it flowing freely, comfortably, giving you energy where you need energy, soothing you or relaxing you where you feel tense or irritable. The breath can do a lot. If you're open to the possibilities, it can do even more than you might have imagined.

You'll find it especially useful when you've got headaches or pains in different parts of the body. Just think about the breath energy nourishing that part. You can ask yourself:

When you breathe in, how do you feel the energy in that part of the body? Does it feel constricted? Does it feel like you're pulling the breath in a direction that doesn't feel good? How about imagining the breath going in another direction - the opposite direction. See what that does. Or think of the breath flowing right through the body, not getting caught, not getting stagnant. This helps you gain a sense of well-being in the present moment, and you begin to realize that thinking about the breath is a really useful thing to do. After all, you're working with the energy of life, and the more you think about it, and the more you observe it, the more you should get out of it.

So that's the first strategy: to give yourself something better to think about. And of course you'll notice that while you're thinking about the breath, other thoughts do come in. It's important that you not get upset by that, or frustrated. Just notice that this other thought has come, but you don't have to follow it. You begin to notice that you have certain habits - that you're unwilling to let go of a thought until you've followed it to its conclusion. But you can tell yourself: "You don't need to do that." Just drop the thought, leave it unfinished, and come back. This ability to step back from your thoughts is really important.

This goes together with that image of the mind as a group of people. In the group there can be the thinkers and there can be the observers. If you're in the midst of a thought, and you realize that this is not what you wanted to think, just take on the role of the observer, watching the fact that that thought is there. And then you can decide what do you want to do: Go back to the breath? Or is there some other theme that you can think about that can pull you away from that thought? If you're feeling thoughts of anger, remind yourself: "Anger and hatred don't do you any good." They're attitudes that can be harmful to you and to other people.

So think thoughts of goodwill instead. This doesn't mean you have to love the other person, but simply, you wish well for yourself, you wish well for other people, and include the person you're angry at among the "other people." The purpose of this is so that you can trust yourself more as you

have to engage with that person. Then you'll find it easier to let go of the thought.

This ability to step back is an important part of the practice. So as you're stepping back from your distractions, realize that you're learning an important skill: the ability to pull yourself out of these thoughts and not identify with them. Instead of getting upset at the distractions, just try to remember: It's going to happen again, and you simply have to try to recover more quickly the next time, and more quickly the time after that, until it becomes one of the habitual skills of how you deal with your mind - learning how to step back from a thought, and go back to something that's better to think about.

Now you'll find that in addition to having an alternative place to go, i.e., the breath, you're also going to need some good reasons for pulling out of these thoughts, because sometimes some of these members of the group in the mind have their own ideas about what you should be doing. There's the worrier: "If I think about this particular thing again and again and again, I'll protect myself from any danger in the future." Especially when there's a lot of uncertainty in your life, the mind can go running around all kinds of places, thinking that it's accomplishing something, even though it's just wearing you out. So you have to remind yourself that a lot of things could happen in the future, you have no idea what's going to come, but you *do* know you will need more mindfulness, and more alertness to deal with unexpected things. And this is how you're developing the mindfulness and alertness you'll need: by being with the breath, observing the breath, learning how to keep one thing in mind—i.e., the breath.

So the best way to prepare for future uncertainties is to come back to the breath.

In other words, even though there are thoughts you don't like, and you're frustrated that they're there in the mind, there's also going to be some part of the mind that actually likes this kind of thinking or has a reason for sticking with it. So you have to ask yourself, "Who is that?" Is it somebody you want to identify with? The thoughts where you keep

replaying incidents from the past when you were victimized: That's another very sticky kind of thought. Ask yourself, "Why do you like going back there? What sort of perverse pleasure do you get out of seeing yourself being victimized?" That sense of having been 'in the right' and yet being 'wronged' is really addictive. But it can be really harmful. Learn how to see the harm of that kind of thinking. And also see what you like about it, and then ask yourself, "Do you really want to continue this? Or would you be better off learning how to pull yourself out of that kind of thinking?"

What this means is that the phrase, "learning to think what you want to think and not thinking what you don't want to think," includes not only getting more control over your thought processes, but also changing what you *want* to think; changing your idea of good, useful thinking is.

This is why, in addition to the breath, the Buddha gives you topics to reflect on. For instance, think about the Buddha and the Sangha, people who found true happiness in life. What kind of people were they? They came with problems when they came to the meditation, but they were able to grow up and abandon their childish ways of thinking. They became people who were noble in their behavior, circumspect in their behavior. They changed themselves because they realized that a lot of their habits were causing suffering.

The reflection on stress and the cause of stress—the teachings of the four noble truths—comes in really handy here. There are types of thinking we like to think but they're causing a lot of stress in our lives. They're making it difficult for us to get along with other people, making it difficult for other people to get along with us, yet we keep indulging in this kind of thinking. Can you see that no matter how much you like that kind of thinking, it's not really good for you? Can you drop it? Can you stop thinking in those ways? After all, the ways you think are going to have an impact on the ways you act. They create ruts in your mind, as you think a particular way over and over and over again. So you might ask yourself, if the Buddha were looking in your head right

now, what would he have to say about your thinking? And try to do that in all fairness.

Another contemplation is the contemplation of death. This is not meant to get you morbid or depressed, but simply to remind you that, when you die, the way the death process goes is going to depend on the shape of your mind. What kind of shape is your mind in right now? Is it ready to go, or are there going to be things getting in the way? If you detect some attitudes that are going to get in the way, what can you do to uproot them? And don't put it off for some other time, because death can happen at any time, so: Are you ready to go?

Like that question we talked about today during the class: At the end of the day, as night falls, remind yourself that you could die tonight. All kinds of things could happen unexpectedly. Very few people know, on the day that they actually will be dying, that they're going to die. But suppose this were your last night. Would your mind be thrashing around? And what would it be grasping after? What would it be trying to run toward? What would it be upset about or regretting or whatever? What can you do to train it so that it's *not* obstructed by these things?

The same thing again when the sun rises in the morning: This could be your last day. What would be an obstruction in the mind? Then focus on training the mind to get rid of that obstruction. This is what contemplation of death is all about - getting you focused back on realizing that there's work to be done in your mind, and that meditation is the best way to do it.

So this training in learning how to gain control over your thoughts - thinking what you want to think, and not thinking what you don't want to think - involves several strategies. First, just giving yourself something better to think about, at any time. The breath can always be your default mode, the mode you come back to when you realize, "Okay, I'm thinking something unskillful." You can just go back to the breath.

Then you want to learn to see what it is about unskillful thinking that you find appealing, so you're not just ordering

the mind back to the breath, but you're also going back with a sense of understanding why it's good to be coming back. In this way, you become more and more mature in your attitude toward what you want to think about. You get more sensitive to the impact that your thinking has on your mind. Even things that you used to like to think about, you begin to realize, are not all that helpful. This is how you change your standards for what you want to think about. It's a matter both of technique and of your sense of values.

So you learn how to step back, step back. The Buddha talks about this as an important part of the practice: learning how to step back and observe what's going on in the mind with a sense of detachment, trying to be as mature and observant as you can in evaluating what's going on in the mind. This way, the mind becomes your friend. It helps you as you go through life, as you face all the issues in life. That way, it stays focused on the best place to go—instead of being a committee that's always at odds with itself, running off in every direction, like that man they talked about, who jumped on the horse and rode off in all directions at once. When the mind's untrained, that's what it tends to do. It rides off in all directions at once. It's pulling itself apart this way. This is a lot of why we suffer.

So it's good to take the time, every day, every day, to work on training the mind. Because when it is trained, it's the best friend you can have.