

An Introduction
to
Mindfulness Meditation

Week 4
Mindfulness of Thoughts



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Mindfulness of Thoughts

from "The Issue at Hand" by Gil Fronsdal

Sometimes people think the point of meditation is to stop thinking—to have a silent mind. This does happen occasionally, but it is not necessarily the point of meditation. Thoughts are an important part of life, and mindfulness practice is not supposed to be a struggle against them. We can benefit more by being friends with our thoughts than by regarding them as unfortunate distractions. In mindfulness, we are not stopping thoughts as much as overcoming any preoccupation we have with them.

However, mindfulness is not thinking about things, either. It is a non-discursive observation of our life in all its aspects. In those moments when thinking predominates, mindfulness is the clear and silent awareness that we are thinking. A piece of advice I found helpful and relaxing was when someone said, "For the purpose of meditation, nothing is particularly worth thinking about." Thoughts can come and go as they wish, and the meditator does not need to become involved with them. We are not interested in engaging in the content of our thoughts. Mindfulness of thinking is simply recognizing that we are thinking.

In meditation, when thoughts are subtle and in the background, or when random thoughts pull us away from awareness of the present, all we have to do is resume mindfulness of breathing. However, when our preoccupation with thoughts is stronger than our ability to let go of them easily, then we direct mindfulness to being clearly aware that thinking is occurring.

Strong bouts of thinking are fuelled largely by identification and preoccupation with thoughts. By clearly observing our thinking, we step outside the field of identification. Thinking will usually then soften to a calm and unobtrusive stream.

Sometimes thinking can be strong and compulsive even while we are aware of it. When this happens, one approach is to notice how such thinking affects the body, physically and energetically. It may cause pressure in the head, tension in the forehead, tightness of the shoulders, or a buzzing as if the head were filled with thousands of bumblebees. Let your mindfulness feel the sensations of tightness, pressure, or whatever you discover. To be caught up in the story of these preoccupying thoughts is easy, but if you feel the physical sensation of thinking, then you are bringing attention to the present moment rather than the story line of the thoughts.

When a particular theme keeps reappearing in your thinking, most likely it is triggered by a strong emotion. In that case, no matter how many times you recognize a repeated thought-concern and come back to the breath, the concern is liable to keep reappearing if the associated emotion isn't recognized. For example, people who plan a lot often find that planning thoughts arise out of apprehension. If the fear is not acknowledged, it will become a factory of new planning thoughts. So, if there is a repetitive thought pattern, see if you can discover an emotion associated with it, and then practice mindfulness of the emotion. Ground yourself in the present moment in the emotion itself. When you acknowledge the emotion, often the thoughts it engenders will cease.

Thoughts are a huge part of our lives. Many of us spend much time inhabiting the cognitive world of stories and ideas. Mindfulness practice won't stop the thinking, but it will help prevent us from compulsively following thoughts that have appeared. And this in turn will help us become more balanced, so that our physical, emotional and cognitive sides all work together as a whole.



Support Quotes

Week 4 – Mindfulness of Thoughts

Attitudinal Foundations Review

Non-Judging

Mindfulness is developed by taking the stance of an impartial witness to your own experience. This requires standing back and observing our own thoughts. Noticing the stream of judging mind ... good / bad / neutral ... not trying to stop it but just being aware of it.

Beginner's Mind ("I Don't Know")

We must all empty our cups of all the preconceived ideas, concepts, techniques and methods that prevent us from receiving the new. We must also let go of the "Been There, Done That" stance. It may be true that you have been there, and you may have done that, but perhaps your conception of reality was not the whole concept, "the big picture" if you will.

Too often we let our thinking and our beliefs about what we "know" stop us from seeing things as they really are. With mindfulness, we are cultivating a mind that is willing to see everything as if for the first time and by doing so we remain receptive to new possibilities instead of getting stuck in a rut of our own "expertise."

Helpful Quotes

"In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's there are few." ~ Suzuki-Roshi

"Never mind what I have been taught. Forget about theories and prejudgments and stereotypes. I want to understand the true nature of life. I want to know what this experience of being alive really is. I want to apprehend the true and deepest qualities of life, and I don't want to just accept somebody else's explanation. I want to see it for myself." ~ Bhante G

"If I can't choose what I do, if I don't know the forces that are making me act towards you or anybody else in my life, do I have my own life? Or, is my life an expression, an extension of a series of unconscious forces, all of which apparently have their own life and guidelines that I must serve and be a slave to as long as I remain unconscious of their presence in me? Self-knowledge is the gradual awakening to these elementary, elemental forces that are connected with thoughts and feelings that elicit behaviors in us that, without our knowledge of them, produce an experience of life for us that we then either resist or embrace, but without any choice to do so." ~ Guy Finley

"You do not become good by trying to be good, but by finding the goodness that is already within you, and allowing that goodness to emerge. But it can only emerge if something fundamental changes in your state of consciousness." ~ Eckhart Tolle

"Observe the space between your thoughts, then observe the observer." ~ Hamilton Boudreaux



Assignments for Week 4

□ Reading Assignments

1. "Mindfulness of Thoughts" from "The Issue at Hand" by Gil Fronsdal
2. Support Quotes

□ Mindfulness of Thoughts in Daily Life

1. Practice 30 minutes daily at least 6 days this week. For at least the first ten minutes, keep your meditation simple — focus on the breath. To the best of your ability, when some other experience gets in the way of being with the breath, simply let it go and come back to the breath. After this ten-minute warm-up period, switch to more open mindfulness. This means continuing with the breath until something else becomes more compelling. When physical sensations, emotions or thinking predominate, let go of the breath and focus your meditative awareness on these. When nothing else is compelling, come back to the breathing.
2. Spend some time reflecting on the assumptions, attitudes and beliefs you have about your thoughts. Do you usually assume that they are either true false, right or wrong? Do you identify with your thoughts? That is, do you think that what you think defines who you are? Do you believe that your thinking will solve your problems or that it is the only means to understand something?
3. Once during the next week, spend a one-hour period tracking the kinds of things you think about. Find some way to remind yourself every few minutes to notice what you are thinking. Are the thoughts primarily self-referential or primarily about others? Do they tend to be critical or judgmental? What is the frequency of thoughts of "should" or "ought"? Are the thoughts mostly directed to the future, to the past, or toward fantasy? Do you tend more toward optimistic thoughts or pessimistic ones? Do your thoughts tend to be apprehensive or peaceful? Contented or dissatisfied? This is not an exercise in judging what you notice, but in simply noticing. Most people live in their thoughts. This is a one-hour exercise in regularly and frequently stepping outside of the thought-stream to take up residence, albeit briefly, in a mindful awareness that is bigger than the thinking mind.
4. Once during the next week, spend a one-hour period giving particular attention to your intentions. Before we speak or act there is always an impulse of motivation or intention. Notice the various kinds of desires and aversions that fuel your intentions. For this exercise, you might choose a period where you can go about some ordinary activity in a quiet and mostly undisturbed way. You might even slow your activities down some so that you are more likely to notice and evaluate your motivations.

