Day 4 Morning: Skillful Thinking in Meditation

In meditation, when we are trying to calm and still the mind, I think it’s a common tendency to try to eliminate thinking and get rid of the thinking mind. A common equation comes up: “I think, therefore I suffer. If I didn’t think, I wouldn’t suffer. Buddhism is for the overcoming of suffering, so I must annihilate thinking.”

Usually what happens then is either the thinking explodes or we tie ourselves into knots trying not to think. We might be quite successful in pushing down and suppressing thought, but it never feels very good.

Directing thought to loving-kindness is a skillful way of using and applying thought in a way that allows the mind to build a momentum of skillfulness and wholesomeness. The thoughts are increasingly on the side of that which is kusala, wholesome. The very nature of the kusala citta, the mind of wholesomeness, is that it’s peaceful, settled, and has a steady quality to it.

Another useful way of directing thought is to the aspects of what in Pāli is called *samvega*: urgency, the sense that there is no time to waste or to fool around. One of the reflections that the monastics are encouraged to cultivate on a regular basis is: “The days and nights are relentlessly passing. How well am I spending my time?” That’s a very useful reflection because it is real: days and nights are relentlessly passing. They don’t pass benignly. Each day that passes, we’re older and that much closer to death. That’s the reality: I managed to make it through another day, but we still have death as a reality that we’re going to have to face.

So that is the sense of urgency. Letting time slip by in a way that’s frivolous, empty, or just propping up old habit patterns, recycling our trusty companions of greed, hatred, and delusion: where does that get us? We’ve all done it. We’ve all seen that it’s not so fruitful.

Bringing up those motivations for urgency—aging, sickness, and death; the impermanence and uncertainty of the mind and its moods—is a skillful antidote to complacency. It’s not something to flog ourselves with and turn into a neurotic obsession, but it’s something that is essential in terms of needing to prod ourselves and not waste opportunities.

Urgency is not a frantic quality in the mind. A sense of urgency is a sense of motivation: yes, I want to get up and get moving, get up and have the opportunity to use the time skillfully, to develop virtue, to train in that which is peaceful and to establish myself in wisdom and discernment. These are motivations. Again, it’s not to turn urgency into something that has a frantic or a manic edge to it; that isn’t particularly useful. But it is helpful to have a sense of urgency.

Samvega is a very positive mental state and motivation. As we use directed thought, it’s helpful in meditation or in ordinary circumstances to be able to review the five hindrances. These particular tendencies of the mind are the fundamental qualities that bring us to a place of non-peacefulness and lack of clarity.

So, to review the five hindrances: sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt. In terms of directed thought, see if they’re present, how to work with them, and how they arise.

If there is sensual desire, what are we directing thought towards? We’re usually directing thought towards something we perceive as pleasurable, delightful, and capable of gratification. So that directed thought is then grabbed by the hindrances and defilements and ends up agitating the mind.

When thought is directed towards ill will, aversion, irritation, anger, and displeasure, then it feeds the hindrance. That feeding of the hindrance makes it healthy and strong. We don’t want healthy and strong hindrances; we would be better off starving them. Don’t feed them.

I remember Ajahn Chah saying one time, “You’ve got a cat that comes around—*meow, meow, meow*—and you think, ‘This poor cat!’ And you feed it. Sure enough, it’s back again, on the porch every morning.” At Abhayagiri, people wonder why we don’t have any dogs or cats. If you feed them, they just keep coming around, and they usually tell their friends as well.

If what we are doing with our hindrances is feeding them, we end up with multiple hindrance attacks. Pay attention instead to: “If I don’t feed it, if I don’t direct thought towards the stimulus of the hindrance, then it fades.” That opens up a space, and we can direct attention positively. Especially with ill will, the positive directing of thought towards mettā is a very skillful application of directed thought.

Sloth and torpor happen when we direct thought towards fullness after the meal. We feel a certain lassitude and disinterest. That feeds sloth and torpor. So, just as a training, don’t let the mind rest on things that would tend towards sloth and torpor, to dullness. If we pay attention to it, then the mind absorbs into it, so that lassitude or dullness starts to take over. Withdraw attention and thought from those areas of the mind that are obscure, dull, and amorphous. Especially in meditation, different mental states drift in and drift out of the mind. If we let the mind dwell on the more obscure, amorphous, and drifty states of mind, that’s where we end up, with a mind that’s very dull. So it’s important to direct attention and feed the ability of the mind to focus and center on something that is brightening, sharpening, and clarifying.

How we direct our attention and thought is the same with restlessness and doubt. So, the five hindrances are a very useful area of reflection in terms of how best to bring up and establish attention. Because when we do direct attention in a way that is not dissipated through the distraction of the five hindrances, then the mind actually becomes very steady and strong.

There is a strength there. The Buddha compares it to a mountain stream. If the stream comes down from the mountain and is then channeled off into different little canals and rivulets, the power of the stream is dissipated. It’s not able to wash anything away. That is compared to the energy and flow of the mind as it’s dissipated out into the five hindrances. When it goes off into these different hindrances, the strength of that current or stream is just not so strong. Of course, the opposite is true. When a stream comes down and is not dissipated, it has tremendous power and can be used for something beneficial.

At Abhayagiri, we’re trying to set up a micro-hydro system. If the stream goes off in all sorts of different directions, all you get is a piddly little amount. The turbine goes *kerchunk, kerchunk*, and you get no power or electricity. Whereas if you can get that channel going in one direction, you can generate a lot of electricity and you don’t have to pay the electricity company.

This is natural. These are attributes of nature. It’s just the mind. But it’s important to be attentive and recognize how these patterns and tendencies work.

Then, what happens when we direct thought in a particular way towards the hindrances? What is the result when we’re able to ameliorate and set aside the five hindrances and allow the attention to settle and focus? Since the theme of this retreat is mettā, as the five hindrances go into abeyance, we can bring more attention to the mettā nimitta or mind-object of loving-kindness and allow that to shine forth. We can then direct thought in a way that supports the feeling of well-wishing, softness within the heart, and brightness that holds oneself and others dear. Allow thought to be directed to the feeling of loving-kindness.

Thoughts are there to help as reminders. Underlying them is the particular feeling of spaciousness and warmth in the mind and heart. Allow that to establish itself through the body, directing it toward yourself. The mind is able to keep guarding the sustained application of the thoughts or feelings of loving-kindness.

The Pāli words are *vitakka* and *vicāra*. *Vitakka* is what is translated as thought or directed thought, but it’s both the thought and the bringing of the thought, feeling, or perception up into the mind. That's all vitakka.The arising of the thought of loving-kindness and directing of attention to loving-kindness, whether on the level of thought, feeling, or perception, are all vitakka. *Vicāra* is the sustaining or continuing of that. But there is also an evaluation that goes on: How am I holding it? How is it sustaining itself? What does it feel like? What’s its texture?

There is the initial bringing up of attention into the mind. Then there is the sustaining of that. There is an evaluation, but it’s not an intellectual evaluation. It’s getting a feeling for the texture of that thought and the feeling within the mind so that it’s sustained and we are able to look at it in a different way.

Vitakka is bringing that up into view within the mind, in the same way that I’ve just lifted up the bell-striker. Vicāra is looking at it from different angles. There is an interest there able to sustain it. We get distracted. Okay then, vitakka, bring it up again.

That’s what we are doing with the thoughts of loving-kindness or the meditation object at any time. We are using that process of directed thought and evaluation so that there is a gaining of momentum of interest and attention towards that object. With the object of loving-kindness, it’s that feeling.

It’s not going to be homogeneous or consistent. But that is how we use vitakka and vicāra. We are not trying to make it absolutely consistent. Directed thought and evaluation recognize those different textures and maintain the basic theme of loving-kindness.

Of course, the same is true in terms of whatever meditation object we are using, say the breath. That is what makes the breath interesting. We can determine to make this breath interesting just by focusing. It’s through looking at it, lifting it up, and viewing it from different angles that we can do that. Then the mind is able to settle a bit longer and stay steadily on it.

Then part of the evaluation is recognizing that this is starting to feel good: “My body is feeling more comfortable and settled.” So, there is a recognition of the effect.

With loving-kindness as a meditation object, we encourage ourselves with samvega. We are attentive to the five hindrances, and then we direct thought and evaluation to the object of loving-kindness.

One of the very powerful aspects of loving-kindness is that, as loving-kindness gets stronger, the tendency towards ill will and aversion drops. It can’t land in the mind so easily. There is a very strong positive force that also then helps ameliorate the other hindrances that are akusala, unwholesome or unskillful. It’s a really good bridge towards the steadiness of mind that we are cultivating in conjunction with mindfulness of breathing and awareness of the body. Loving-kindness allows the mind to make the bridge between the point where the hindrances are still kicking in a bit and a place where it is more exclusively wholesome and settled. Wholesome and bright mental states rely on loving-kindness.

The sense of seclusion from sensual desire and unwholesome mental states creates a very real shift through which the mind can then settle into its object. Whether that object is the mettā nimitta or the breath depends on what we are comfortable with. But mettā provides a very stable bridge into that steadiness of mind where the mind is able to unify. Unification of the mind is disrupted by those little rivulets going off in different directions: to sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness, or doubt.

Allow the mind to bridge that gap and develop interest in something that is more positive. It’s quite natural. As human beings, we are hardwired to prefer pleasure to pain. So if we can see something that is really pleasurable, then the mind can unify with that. Something as pleasurable as the feeling of loving-kindness is able to bridge across the habit patterns of restlessness, doubt, or drifting, and go to that steadiness of mind.

As we practice and work with vitakka vicāra bybringing up and sustaining positive thought, something pleasurable, bright, and joyful arises in the mind. We are not doing anything wrong. It’s all right to feel that. You may get excited and start to analyze. Instead, give yourself permission to enjoy meditation.

As human beings, we haplessly bumble into old patterns: “Here I am, back suffering again. At least it’s familiar and feels secure.” Rather, allow the mind to explore the regions of well-being and happiness. Confidence can be there, because it’s not just pleasure arising out of trying to get something gratifying in terms of a sensual hit. It’s more deeply satisfying and joyful when based on purity of intention and an unalloyed quality of skillfulness. It’s wholesome.

In the story of the Buddha, when he was still the Bodhisattva and striving for awakening, he struggled with ascetic practices. He got to the point where he was emaciated and frustrated. He then had a memory of when he was a young child: becoming very peaceful, settled, and concentrated when he was left on his own during a ceremony. He was about nine years old and his mind went into stillness. He recalled that memory and wondered, “Why am I afraid of that happiness that is untainted by sensuality and unskillful tendencies? Perhaps that’s the path.” There was a realization that there is actually nothing wrong with that kind of happiness. Then the Buddha thought that he would never be able to cultivate that path in his emaciated shape, so he started eating again. That is when he had the insight into the Middle Way.

So, cultivation relies on directed thought and uses the investigative process, the ability to pay attention and allow the mind to channel its energies. Not attending to things that are disruptive to the mind, but being able to sustain attention on those things that are nurturing to the mind and heart: that is how the mind is able to unify. It doesn’t happen by chance or just by sitting long enough, as if you’re going to get peaceful if you put in enough hours.

In my early years as a monk, I remember another monk in my monastery. He had been ordained for several years, but he never appeared very peaceful to me. As I got to know him, I found that from the time he first started meditating, he had a journal and kept track of every meditation session he’d ever had and how many hours and minutes he’d meditated. It was kind of like, “If I build my account up enough, somehow, I’m going to get peaceful.”

Well, no. You have to be doing it in the right way. You actually have to be skillful. So learn those skills of directing attention: What do you feed? What do you starve? What do you pay attention to? What do you ignore? What do you encourage? What do you discourage? It takes some discernment and reflection.

Then recognize that there are intrinsic effects of different mental states, such as anger, ill will, and restlessness. They have an intrinsic effect on the mind; they are agitating. Loving-kindness, the quality of compassion, respect for truth: these are all things that have a deeply settling effect within the heart.

So allow the mind to attend to that. Allow the mind to sustain that attention. And then realize how the mind can unify, relying on that. Sometimes there are overtones of interpretation or meaning that come from particular words. When we talk about concentration, just the word concentration tends to have a feeling of “me, concentrating, forcing my mind on something and holding it there.” But that doesn’t really convey what we actually do. Unification, on the other hand, involves directed thought, evaluation, joy, and well-being. The mind can be unified in the sense that it’s unified in this feeling of well-being and peace, of being very settled and steady. It’s all working together and comes together in a place of steadiness. So these are some reflections this morning for meditation.