

Wise Thinking (5 of 5) Deep Thoughts in a Silent Mind

December 22, 2023

SUMMARY KEYWORDS “Monastery Within,” question, investigate, surface mind, depth, fuel, content, stories, energetically, clinging, attachment, need, desires, greed, aversion, hostility, criticism, confusion, fear, stress-free, vacation, creativity, limitation, contraction, tension, analysis, simple, harmony, recognition, knowing, calm, peace, knowing, joy, concentration, spaciousness, settledness, preverbal cognition, bubbles

Gil Fronsdal

Hello and welcome to the fifth talk on wise thinking. I suspect that for much of my life, I didn't think much about my thinking. I took thinking for granted or took it to be what it is. Sometimes in a way, I took it to be who I am, as if my thinking represented me and my interests, my thoughts, my beliefs, my opinions, and my emotions. Thinking was not anything to question, consider, or investigate. It was just taken for granted, like a big, solid event in its own right. With meditation, I've learned to

Wise Thinking (5 of 5) Deep Thoughts in a Silent Mind

not take it for granted, but rather, to be mindful of thinking, investigate the nature and ecology of thinking, and look at what goes on as I think.

Thinking is a composite thing. It's made up of many different parts, only one of which is the content of the thoughts, the specific ideas or stories that are being considered. It is a great thing to open up to the wider field of what's going on in the emotional field, the physical field – what's going on in the body energetically – the tensions and holding that are the fuel or the source for the emotions. A whole hour and a half on mindfulness of thinking is included in the basic introduction to meditation instructions here at IMC.

.
One of the things we can discover is that there are different levels of thinking or different sources from which we think. These are qualitatively different kinds of thinking that we can do. We can start to understand the range of possible ways of thinking and the kinds of thoughts we can have – not so much the content, but where they arise from and what's feeding and fueling them.

At some point, we can discover that there is a kind of thinking that is free of any clinging, attachment, or need.

Wise Thinking (5 of 5) Deep Thoughts in a Silent Mind

The surface mind, the more usual way of thinking, operates from need, desires, greed, aversion, hostility, criticism, confusion, and fear. For some, it operates from stress. But it is possible to discover a way of thinking that is stress-free. For some people, this is the source of creativity. Sometimes people need to take a vacation from stress. Sometimes meditating is enough to awaken the capacity for creative thinking, which can't flow when there's the limitation and contraction of any tension connected to thinking.

We start to feel there's a different way of thinking, a whole different approach to thinking. Seeing this begins to put a question mark about the value of the usual way of thinking – is this really the best thing to be doing? Is this the best way to think? More importantly, are the messages coming from the surface mind that does the thinking really accurate? Are they true? Are they valuable? Are they something we need to believe in?

Or is it appropriate to question those messages and look to see more deeply what's really going on here? I found that the answer was often yes. It is appropriate to question. It is appropriate to look more deeply at what's really happening within.

Wise Thinking (5 of 5) Deep Thoughts in a Silent Mind

As we go deeper within, we discover that there's a place of thinking that comes out of being stress-free. It comes from some core part of us, some deep place inside where there's calm or peace. The nature of those thoughts is very different. They are very simple. They can be sophisticated because they can take in the whole of who we are. Whenever we're tense, we're always limited.

We have so many faculties and abilities that come into play when there's a sense of harmony within. Then all these capacities can come together into an intuitive or well-informed understanding. We don't necessarily recognize all the data that's coming in. That's why this kind of thinking is creative. That's why it knows so much and can be so effective.

This thinking can be sophisticated, but the content of the thoughts and the way they appear are not complicated. It's not a deep, complicated analysis. It's satisfying in and of itself. It's very simple. Even that thinking can get quieter and quieter. Sometimes it's just the most rudimentary act of recognition of what's happening in the present moment – calm, peace, knowing, joy, concentration, spaciousness, settledness. It is very simple, without being for or against, wanting or not wanting, just knowing, knowing, knowing.

Wise Thinking (5 of 5) Deep Thoughts in a Silent Mind

So much of our life drops away. Things just drop away, drop away. This feels like the most satisfying place to be

– in this very deep, quiet knowing that we are connected to and experience in a deep way.

It might be possible to sense at some point that there is a kind of cognition, a kind of knowing, that happens before there are words, thoughts, or images. A funny thing can happen in deep states of meditation. It is possible to feel physically that a thought is about to happen. The image I often have had for this thinking is like bubbles that begin to grow on the surface of water, and I know these thought bubbles will leave the surface at some point.

I could feel a little bit of pressure, a little bit of movement or energy behind the thinking. Because the deep attention – this almost pre-verbal knowing – is right there to feel and know and recognize what's happening, that impulse to think fades away. I knew I was about to think, but I never discovered what those thoughts were going to be.

Wise Thinking (5 of 5) Deep Thoughts in a Silent Mind

In other words, thinking often begins offline in this deeper place. We have a rich inner life that's deeper than our verbal thoughts and images. When the mind is quiet, we can sometimes sense this pre-verbal knowing. This knowing is not necessarily accurate, but it's knowing freely with depth. Then, because we're paying attention and being mindful, there's a kind of a check and balance system. We can question, "Oh, is this so? Let's find out. Let's look more deeply or check the situation out more."

The important thing I want to highlight today is that it's possible to let the surface mind become silent. It is exquisitely beautiful to be in the world with the surface mind quiet and peaceful, but with the deep mind present, aware, connected, and considering what's happening around us and within us. There's an intelligence there. We don't need to have the surface mind always thinking, always operating, always figuring out. It is wonderful that we can be present for others, ourselves, and the world with the surface mind quiet and peaceful and the deeper mind available.

Begin to recognize when the hum of the refrigerator quiets in the mind – the surface mind gets quiet. We can still think, but we're not thinking from the place

Wise Thinking (5 of 5) Deep Thoughts in a Silent Mind

where the hum, the stress, is happening. The surface mind is silent.

I want to end with a story from my little book of stories called "A Monastery Within:"

"The monastery work leader always appeared peaceful. This was not so unusual among the monks and nuns of the monastery. He was unique, however, in that he remained peaceful and calm even when the monastery was at its busiest, for example, when large crowds of people visited to celebrate the Buddha's birthday. If a person was needed to visit the hustle and bustle of the local market town, this was the monk the monastery usually sent.

When asked how he managed to remain peaceful, he said, "I entered the monastery for peace and quiet. I had spent years in the harried world of commerce and people. I longed for the silence the monastery was rumored to have. I was delighted with my first weeks in the monastery. The silence was exquisite. However, as I settled into the silence of the place, I was shocked to learn how noisy my own mind was. The real noise was within. It was the busyness of my own mind that oppressed me, not

Wise Thinking (5 of 5) Deep Thoughts in a Silent Mind

the noise and activity of the world. Now it doesn't matter to me where I go. I carry the silence within me."

I hope that talking about the different aspects of thinking this week has opened a window for you to investigate and consider your thinking in a new way. Just questioning what our thinking is about is a step towards a kind of mental freedom from being caught in the grip of our thoughts or automatically believing every thought we have and thinking that we are our thoughts.

There is a deeper way of being, a deeper way of living in the world than from the control tower of the surface mind. From time to time, may that surface mind provide you with a nurturing silence and quiet. May you discover how to operate in the world with a quiet surface mind. Thank you very much.

My plan for the beginning of the year is to go back to the basics and do in-depth instructions on the basic insight practice that I teach here at IMC. Even if you've been a practitioner for a long time, I hope that as I teach it new dimensions will become available for you. There will be a week on each of the five different areas that I emphasize in the introduction to meditation course – breath, body, emotions, thinking, and practicing in life.

Wise Thinking (5 of 5) Deep Thoughts in a Silent Mind

May the beginning of the new solar year today be a rebirth of all that's good in you. I look forward to seeing you in a couple of weeks.