

# Thoughts and Emotions (1 of 5)

## Rumination

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So, good day everyone. Being Monday, we begin a new theme for the week. And I'd like to somehow continue with a general theme of emotions. It's in the background or the backdrop for what this theme is. The theme is going to be thinking and emotions: the relationship between our emotional life and our thinking life.

Thoughts and emotions go hand in hand. Sometimes I've noticed, maybe in myself and people I've talked to, a very strong division between emotions and thinking, sometimes preferring one over the other. But the more that I've meditated, the more I can't really separate them completely from each other. They come together as a piece. Sometimes one stands out more strongly than the other. Sometimes one seems to be the catalyst for the other.

Sometimes thoughts evoke emotions. Sometimes emotions arise – who knows why? And in their wake,

there come certain thoughts. Sometimes our emotions are somehow fueling the thoughts that we have. Sometimes our emotions give energy to our thoughts. So to be able to get a handle on and learn how to be mindful of the whole process of thinking, of emotions or emotional life, it helps to take stock of this thinking world and start seeing the connection between the two.

Today, I want to emphasize the idea that you would study this for yourself. That you would begin, during this week, to take care to notice as you're thinking – what role, what relationship, what impact, does that thinking have on your emotional life? And what impact or role do your emotions have on the thoughts that you have?

I want to talk about one particular kind of thinking that is very important for some of us to be mindful of. That is rumination. I love the word rumination because of its bovine reference. Cows eat grass, regurgitate the grass, and then chew it. And so we take and regurgitate these stories, ideas, fantasies, all kinds of things, and then we chew on it and chew on it.

This rumination is like thoughts turning in on themselves so that there's kind of a black hole or we're kind of trapped in them. It's often very repetitive, repeating the same kinds of thoughts over and over again. It's not daydreaming. Rumination is really chewing on

something, working something or driving something home. Usually, it's not very healthy for us. That's at least how I use the term. Maybe there are other legitimate ways of using the word rumination.

But this idea of being caught in thoughts and spinning over and over again is so powerful that psychotherapists will point out that one of the leading correlates or maybe even causes for depression, for many people, not everyone, is rumination. How that works is we're telling ourselves a story about how terrible things are or how frightening. Maybe having self-pitying thoughts, discouraging thoughts, or depressing thoughts that things are too hard or terrible things are happening. Terrible things do happen to people, but there's a ruminating about it over and over again. That's a very distinct way in which we become a victim. We become a victim of our own thinking, the loops we're in.

It might be true, for example, that there are certain ways in my life that I'm a careless person. The other day I spilled some coffee on the kitchen floor and didn't notice it. My wife pointed it out and she cleaned it up. So there are ways in which I'm a careless person. I can notice that and say, "Yes, Gil, you were careless today. Sometimes you're a careless person."

Or, I can say: "Gil, you're a careless person. People are

telling you that it is bad to be a careless person. You're a mindfulness teacher, so you should know how to be careful, attentive, and not careless. Now all these people know that you're careless. It's really bad that I'm such a bad person. I'm a careless person, and it speaks badly for 40, 50 years of Buddhist training. This casts a very bad light on me, my practice, and my dedication." So I should stop now. I'm sure you're getting tired already.

The idea is that I'm kind of digging myself a grave. Each of those thoughts is like a nail in the coffin: "Oh, I'm so terrible. I'm so terrible. I'm so terrible. I'm so terrible." Maybe each one doesn't have a big impact on me. But the continuity, the repetition of it, begins to wear me down and drain me.

So that's what I'm referring to as rumination: the wearing down due to the same message over and over and over again. It might not be so conscious that it's thinking because it might be almost like an attitude or an emotion. But it is a belief. It is an idea that we have. We're repeating it so often that the negative quality of it is draining us.

The emphasis I want to make here is in case there's some truth to this statement: say it once, learn from it, and do a course correction the best you can, but there's

no requirement to repeat the same thought about yourself over and over again.

Now it's very hard to stop doing that, of course. But one of the ways to change the direction of all this is to start being cognizant that this is working. Recognize how repetitive your mind is. Recognize that you're telling yourself the same story, the same message, over and over again. And notice the impact. How is this affecting your energy level, your inspiration level? What emotions does it bring? Does it bring fear? And how does it affect your body? Some people who have very somatic-based bodies will concede that as they have certain thoughts, their bodies begin to shift and change, certain muscles tighten up. And energies in the body shift and change.

So to have thoughts about some frightening thing happening, fantasy of frightening things happening, and feelings of fear in the body are triggered. To have thoughts of desire and ruminate about desire and sexual fantasies, and other sensations in the body get aroused. To have fantasies and repetition about all the wrongs that have been done, and feelings of anger arise. Maybe wrongs have been done. But to tell yourself a story over and over and over again, don't confuse the harm someone else has done with the harm that you're doing to yourself.

Saying angry, critical, or depressing thoughts to yourself over and over again – it's harmful to do that to yourself. This the second arrow that we add. The first arrow is life, which we can't necessarily control. But we can have some control over the second arrows.

Along this line, it's very common for meditation teachers like me to say that maybe you can't always control your thinking mind in terms of whether you think or don't think. But what you can do – just like you can't control a big wide river – you can be in the river and find the right current to be in, the right place in the river, avoiding the rapids.

So we can be in the world of thinking and make adjustments. Get into a different boat on the river of thoughts. Go into a different current or an eddy where it's safe; avoid the whirlpools and the rapids. Notice the rumination, notice the repetitive thoughts, that are maybe sometimes debilitating. Notice how repetitive they are, you can count them.

It's fascinating to start counting how many times you have the same kind of thought. That can take some of the charge or the authority out of them. By the time you get to 300, it's like they don't have so much authority. Or you can see the effect it has on your body or your emotions. And you could offer different thoughts. You

can consciously begin thinking about something more positive, not a fantasy in itself, but something that's true, that's kind, that's generous, that's soft.

One of the ways to even do it if you're by yourself – maybe driving or something – rather than ruminating on difficult thoughts, is to start talking out loud to yourself, in a friendly voice, thoughts that are supportive. Sometimes the voice that thinks comes from a different place in the mind than the voice that speaks. So you're tapping into a different side of yourself when you're speaking out loud. Maybe there's more wisdom. Maybe there's more kindness. Maybe there's more access to a choice of how to be than if you just let your thinking keep going.

Also start experimenting with shifting what you're thinking about. It might sound artificial. It might sound a little bit forced and effortful. However, if it's better than the alternative, try doing it. Maybe the ruminating, spinning, debilitating, and draining thoughts are the ones that are artificial. Maybe we should be questioning those thoughts about how much energy is going into them.

So you might try to offer an alternative. Consciously choose what you think and think good things. This is not meant to be Pollyannish. It's not meant to be antidotal

thinking necessarily. It's not meant to be pretending that everything is fine. It could be very realistic thoughts about what's happening that see reality, what's happening directly and right in the eye. But that meets it and thinks about it in wise, kind, supportive, and compassionate ways. Ways that maybe you would imagine the Buddha would speak. Or the way that some wonderful person that you know, a wise, kind person whom you're inspired by, how they might speak about the situation.

What I'm offering today requires some mindfulness, but it is a practice that's kind of different from mindfulness. I'm hoping that this investigation and this practice of thinking in new ways will be a tremendous support for your ability to be mindfully present. If something can settle, the rumination can settle, and you can be inspired by a different way to go forward.

I hope that you find a way to enjoy this and take up the challenge if you're one of those people who might ruminate in ways that are not useful for you. And if you're not one of those people, then tomorrow we'll take the world of thinking from a different angle. Thank you.