

Wise Thinking (1 of 5) The Influence of Thoughts

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Hello and welcome on this Monday when we'll begin a new topic for the week. Maybe because I just came from teaching a retreat for a week, what surfaced for me is that I want to talk about thinking.

A very important part of a wise life is becoming wise about our thinking. I think that for many people thinking often happens on automatic pilot. We just take for granted that this is how it should be. Thinking churns out whatever thoughts it does and we just go along for the ride.

The thoughts we have can have a huge influence on us. If we are on automatic pilot, just allowing those thoughts to be there and have that influence on us, they can be quite detrimental. Some psychologists believe that one of the leading causes of depression is rumination. If we are thinking unpleasant thoughts, one of those thoughts might be just a small drop with an unpleasant effect on us. But if we have the same kind of thoughts over and over again throughout the day, they begin to wear us down. They begin to fill us with the unpleasantness that comes along with them.

If those thoughts are self-criticism of any kind, or if we are constantly having thoughts about our shame, our guilt, or our inadequacy, often the frequency of those thoughts is never questioned. Maybe to some degree, all those thoughts might be true and might warrant some reflection and consideration. But there is no need to have thoughts like that repeatedly over and over again. If anybody else talked as repeatedly as we might be talking to ourselves, we would wonder about their mental health. They might seem quite foolish. But we don't question the foolishness of ourselves having the same thought.

Thinking can be automatic. We can take it for granted that what we think is how things should be. So starting to become mindful of thinking is hugely important. Some people have no clue how to do this. This might be partly

because we have a variety of different cognitive abilities – ways in which the mind cognizes and understands our lives. Some of these can be pre-verbal or non-verbal ways of understanding and processing.

However, there are also verbal ways of processing. There is the inner voice, the inner speech that we have. Some people don't have inner speech. They produce inner images. But whether it's images or inner speech, both tend to follow the rules of our language. Processing tends to follow the story, the narrative that inner speech can make.

To become aware of how this works for us, it is interesting to discover whether we think mostly in images or mostly in words when we are actively thinking. Another discovery is to know what influence that thinking has on us. Is it uplifting? Does it energize nicely? Is it agitating? Is it making us sad? Does it make us feel ashamed, embarrassed, or deflated? What influence do the thoughts have?

Thoughts do not need to influence us. They do not need to come along with a mood that sets up how we have to feel. But it's hard to tease those apart. For example, I've been sitting quietly, thinking about my kids when they were young, and then suddenly an image would come up about some danger they were in. I could feel the influence of the thought as fear throughout my body.

They weren't in any imminent danger. But those thoughts and images that I had cast an incredible spell on my body.

It doesn't have to be that way. It is possible to have a clear enough attention and recognition that is stronger than the influence of the thoughts. It's like when we go to a horror movie and feel afraid. There's fear. But if you look around the theater and see there are people eating popcorn and falling asleep or doing what they do in theaters, then you're not as absorbed in the images on the screen and maybe they don't affect you as much. Or if you start looking at the cinematographic techniques used in the movie, then you're not so caught up and lost in the story and it doesn't have such a strong effect. So we can step back and look at what influence thinking has.

The inner voice or images – the way of thinking – might be discursive. I use the word “discursive” in a way that's not exactly what the dictionary says. The dictionary meaning is just rambling, maybe random thoughts going this way and that way, running around. But I also think of “discursive” as carrying on a discourse, carrying on a conversation in our mind.

This could be a conversation in which we're judging ourselves and thinking about everything bad. It could be a conversation about planning what's going to happen

and imagining the future. It could be a conversation about what happened in the past, repeating it over and over again. It could literally be an imagined conversation with another person, where you are even filling in their part of the conversation.

“Discursive” means a relatively active and energetic way of having a conversation in the mind, or jumping around from one topic to another but still carrying on a conversation. The inner voice is speaking or the inner projector is projecting images of all this stuff.

If we take these discursive thoughts for granted, believing this is the way it has to be, then we are really limiting the capacity and the full richness of what our inner mental life can be. Instead, we can recognize, “Oh, I’m having a conversation. I’m having a movie about what’s going to come. And this is the influence it has. Wow, look at that influence.”

What difference does it make when you recognize you’re having a conversation, your inner voice is going along, and it has an effect on your mood, your energy, and how you understand yourself? Is that influence necessary?

Do we need to believe every thought? Do we need to be affected by every thought? Do we need to go to horror movies all the time? Not that all thoughts are scary, but they can be angry and critical. What influence

do they have? And what difference does it make when you know and recognize that influence?

The influence of thoughts can be subtle. It can also be very, very strong. Thinking subtle thoughts for a long period of time and repeatedly coming back to them can have a huge impact on our lives and how we understand ourselves.

We don't have to believe every thought we have. We don't have to be under its influence emotionally or mood-wise. What we think does not have to agitate us or depress us. We can just breathe with it, and breathe through it. Breathing is a bit of a protection. Not that we have to stop thinking, but breathing offers protection so that we have a more balanced perspective on our thoughts, our involvement with them, and how they influence us.

We can learn the art of breathing with and through the thinking mind, along with or beside thinking. That way the mental energy doesn't all go into the thoughts. There can be another perspective, a balancing force while we're thinking. I think this is one reason why some people like to go for a walk when they're really troubled. It is kind of like going for a walk with yourself. It's like having a friend. Then something else is going on rather than being caught in our minds.

To give a fresh perspective, taking a walk breaks up the hegemony that thinking has on us. It is the same way with breathing. Breathing can be kind of like going for a walk with oneself, accompanying oneself, and breathing through. Breathing can be like a little gentle shield or a gentle wind that blows away the influence that the thoughts might have on us otherwise.

Does that help us to see our thinking in a wiser way? Does that help us to reconsider, to question – are these thoughts true? Are they useful? Is there a better way to think? Are there better thoughts to have? What might those be? If there are better thoughts to have, consciously and deliberately begin having those thoughts.

You're allowed to have a sense of deliberateness about what you think, as opposed to just being the victim of whatever the mind wants to spew out or run. You can actually choose. Maybe not for a long time, but you can break the chain and think about things that are reasonable and true, things that are uplifting and supportive, and things that are wise. Take your mind for a walk so that the thinking mind, the discursive mind, doesn't have the upper hand.

In the next few days, I'll talk about different kinds of thinking and different ways of thinking. If we never think about or understand all the different aspects of thinking,

we might be very limited in how we think, and therefore more likely to be the victim of how we think. Learning new ways of thinking can set us free in many ways. Thank you for this, and I look forward to continuing tomorrow.
Thank you.