

Wise Thinking (2 of 5) Redirecting Thoughts

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Continuing the theme of wise thinking. In Buddhist practice, all our life is a subject for practice. Everything that we are is a worthy object for our mindfulness and attention. That includes the world of thinking. Certainly, there is a lot to learn about thinking by being mindful of it. But also, thinking is such an important and necessary activity in our lives that we don't have to leave what we think about to chance. We don't have to let the automatic pilot tell us what to think. We don't have to be the victim of our thoughts.

We can deliberately think things that are supportive and helpful. We can change the currents of the river of thinking we are involved in. We can introduce new

things to fill our minds. This has to be done wisely so it's not simply covering over how we are by creating a happy scenario so that we don't have to feel our sadness or grief or anger, pretending that everything is good. That doesn't work.

But we don't have to just go along with whatever our mind gives us in terms of distracted thoughts. We can, in a certain sense, be in charge of our thoughts, rather than the thoughts being in charge of us.

One form of thinking that's quite common is the story-making mind. We construct stories, scenarios, images, and scenes, and make predictions. Planning the future is partly a story about what we think is going to happen, what we're going to say, and how we're going to behave in the story. If we're remembering the past, it's usually a story about something that happened then. There's a narrative behind it.

Sometimes there's a narrative framework around which we tell a story about our present moment. For instance, "Oh, this is not going to work out. I can't do this. This is hard. This is too hard." Or, "This is great. I'm wonderful and I want everyone to appreciate me more and more because of how wonderful I am." There are a lot more things going on.

Those stories can be elaborate fantasies and huge scenarios. If those stories are unfortunate – if they're fear stories, anger stories, despair stories, or conceit stories, they create a mood and affect us in profound ways. It's as if mood music comes along with the stories we tell ourselves, and that mood music can depress us or enliven us, benefit us or close us down.

So we need to learn how to engage in deliberate thought while we meditate – to think wisely, recognize what we're thinking about, and reframe it. We need to do this in just the right way – not too much; it's almost better to do too little.

For example, in the story-making mind, one of the main characters in the story is often ourselves. Sometimes we repeat the same story over and over again, or the same memory. We repeatedly tell ourselves the story, the conclusion of the story, and the implications of the story. If doing this is debilitating and draining us of our energy and vitality, then it's probably not useful to keep telling ourselves that story over and over again.

In a certain way, we can take responsibility or take control of our thinking by figuring out how to think in a way that's not debilitating. Think a different way. Maybe there are ways of thinking *about* your distracted thoughts.

Will you tell yourself a different story? Will you tell yourself it's not like that – there's another perspective?

Sometimes you can tell yourself a reframing of what you're doing. For example, if something difficult happened to you and you feel really bad about yourself, then reframe it. Ask what you could learn from this. How can you be a better person in the future, rather than being weighed down by the past? Let yourself learn from that. What could you learn from that experience?

That's being truthful, honest, direct, and real about what happened, but reframing it in such a way that it does something positive for us. We learn something. We learn how to be better because of it. We step into rather than away from the problem. Whenever something's debilitating, we try not to participate in the thoughts we churn out that are debilitating. We can be honest about why we're doing it, and what we're feeling. But we can ask if there is another way of understanding it, another story we can tell ourselves.

If we're doing Buddhist practice, we can say, "Well, instead of ruminating about this story over and over again, the story I have is that now I can fold this into my practice. I have a practice that helps liberate this. I have a practice that helps bring kindness, or gentleness, or stillness to this. I have a practice that shields me from the impact of this. The stronger the mindfulness is, the

less the mood music of those stories are going to penetrate into my heart."

We can tell ourselves those practice stories because they can be true stories. They can call upon positive ways of being. The new stories, the new framework, can bring us a little bit of joy, happiness, relief, or confidence. "Oh, it can be a different way."

I'm not suggesting we do this all the time, but I am suggesting maybe doing it when it's the better alternative.

If we notice that what we're doing is spinning out in our thoughts or getting pulled into destructive thoughts, or we've had the same thought, the same story, a thousand times, then we probably have something better to do. We don't need to do it again.

So we can step forward with a sense of agency, a sense of ability to change the currents of our lives, to take control of ourselves, and monitor ourselves by engaging in a reframing, a new story that is better than the one that's debilitating you.

Again, we don't make up or invent something, or project a fake positive regard onto ourselves. We recognize what's happening and then reframe it realistically into a much better, more interesting story. For example, if there are a lot of challenges, I've known people who

suddenly get buoyed up and inspired when the challenges are reframed for them: they are learning to practice with this so they can help others who have the same challenge.

"Oh, yes, when I'm just focusing on myself, the main subject of my story, I feel more depressed. I feel like, one more time it's so hard. But when I think there's a higher purpose for going through with this I feel better. By learning, recognizing, and practicing with this, I'm going to be able to support other people going through it. I'll understand them better. The more I understand myself with my difficulty, the more I'll understand other people with this difficulty. The more I learn to be patient, the more I learn to have insight, the more I learn to practice with it, the more I can support other people to do the same."

The main point I'm trying to make today is: don't be a victim of your stories. Don't operate on automatic pilot with what you think about throughout the day, as if you have to, or as if you are your thoughts, or you have no say over what you think and you have to just go along with it. Don't believe that every thought you have is true and so it has to be there. This is not the case.

We can have some role in how we think and what we think about. We can think in ways that are supportive

and helpful. For those of us doing Buddhist practice, we have a whole repertoire, a whole set of understandings about what we're doing that's quite profound. Call upon how we understand the practice, how it's beneficial, and how bringing the practice to our difficulties is a reframing of the difficulty. The practice brings a new story into our challenges – the story of practice, the Buddha's story, about how we can practice with this challenge and find our liberation from it.

Or we can sit patiently and not give in to it. Maybe we tell ourselves the story of Mara, who comes to the Buddha. Mara is a temptation, a devilish kind of person who tries to stop the Buddha from being enlightened. The story the Buddha tells is not that he has to fight and battle Mara, but he just looks him straight in the eye and says, "Mara, I see you." And that's enough. He's not for or against Mara. He doesn't criticize Mara. He says, "Mara, I see you." Mara can't stand to be clearly seen and just disappears. He can't manage and goes away. Mara loses his power if he's seen that clearly.

You have your challenges, your strong drives, desires, and ill will, which come up so powerfully. Tell yourself the story of Mara. You might say the words, "Mara, I see you." Use that to really see what's going on with such clarity that you don't get pulled into the world of your desires and aversions. You're standing up and really seeing, "Oh, this is what it is."

Deliberate thinking and reframing your experience is a skill we have to learn. It can seem like you're being busy in meditation when you do this. But the idea is to develop this skill so you know when to bring it in, because it's supportive, and so you know when this is the better alternative rather than merely going along with distracted thought.

Today, as you go through the day, may you find ways to reframe your experience and place whatever is happening to you into a story that is different from the one that you're habitually or unconsciously engaged in. May your life occur within stories that bring you and others tremendous benefit and freedom.
Thank you.